Two Fair Plaits

MALCOLM SAVILLE

CHAPTER ONE.

The Woman In Black.

BELINDA FERGUSON stood on the platform of New Street Station, Birmingham, looking up at her father. Then she glanced at the big clock and saw that there were still ten long minutes to wait before the London train was due to start. She hated this waiting. Perhaps it would be more sensible if Daddy went now? Her case was on the seat in the “Ladies Only” compartment, and somehow to say “Good-bye’ now could not possibly be as beastly as it would when the train left.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and flicked back her two fair plaits; but before she could speak her father seemed to guess her thoughts for he smiled down at her, rested an arm on her shoulders for a second, and said, “Come on, Linda! Let’s walk up and have a look at the engine. I can never resist engines, and it’s cold standing here. Shouldn’t be surprised if you don’t have snow in London on Christmas Day.”

She slipped her hand into his as they moved together up the long platform. It was not easy to walk side by side, for anxious passengers were jostling round the bookstall, stumbling over suit-cases and rushing up and down the train looking for corner seats. It was difficult to talk too, above the din of hissing steam, engine whistles, shouting porters, clattering trolleys,

and chattering people.

Belinda squeezed her father’s hand and, in a sudden lull, said suddenly, “Daddy! I don’t want to go. I know I’ll have an exciting time, but I don’t want to go and see Granny without you. Why doesn't she ask you? Why did you tell her that I would come without you ?”

The tall man looked straight ahead at the red signal lights glowing in the afternoon dusk at the end of the platform.

“You’re not afraid to travel by yourself, are you, darling? Sure you’re not ?”

“Of course I'm sure. I'm eleven, aren’t I, and I've been looking after you for three years now without Mummy! I don’t mind going by myself a bit. It will be fun, and Granny promised she’d meet me on the platform at Euston.... But how will I know her, Daddy? I don’t remember her really ’cept that she was small with a wrinkly face and wore black, and sometimes had a stick with rubber on the end of it.”

“Don’t worry about that, Linda! She will know you, Just stand on the platform until she finds you. If she doesn’t turn up, go straight to the Station-master’s office and ask them to ring up the telephone number I gave you, But she’ll be there. Don’t worry.”

“I'm not worrying about that, Daddy. What I

can’t understand is why you can’t come and spend Christmas at Granny’s as well. Don’t you like her? And if you don’t, I hate her too and I just won’t go.”

They stopped at the end of the platform and watched ‘the great engine come gliding silently over the points until it gently touched the buffers of the waiting train. The engine-driver in his peaked cap leaned from his cab, wiped his hands on an oily rag, and winked at Belinda. She flashed a smile at him and then turned seriously to her father again.

“Tell me now, why you aren’t coming too

“I have told you, darling. It is you that Mrs. Haw-kins wants to see. Your mother was her only daughter and you are her only grandchild. Now she thinks you are growing up I don’t think that, of course and old enough to go paying visits without your old father.”

“Have you quarrelled with her, Daddy? Tell me, honestly.”

“No, Linda. Not really. She just doesn’t like me very much. Remember that she’s old and lonely even if she does live in a big house, and remember that she wants to get 1o know you. Be kind to her, but be yourself and try to make her love you, and come back soon. . . . Here's your carriage. Jump in! And here’s an extra Christmas present for you that you can open now if you like,” and he pulled a soft parcel

from his pocket and tossed it on to her lap.

“Now? Can I really?”

The guard blew his whistle as she pulled frantically at the string. The door slammed before she had torn the paper apart, but she had time to lean from the window and hug her father before the train started.

“Look at it,” he laughed, “I’m sure it’s too old for you really, but I thought you'd like it. Just right for London too! You like it, darling? Put your school hat on the rack and wear that instead.”

Then the guard blew his whistle as she franticly pulled at the string. The door slammed before she had time to lean from the window and hug her father before train started. “Look at it,” he laughed, “I am sure it’s to old for you really, but I thought you would like it. Just right for London too! You like it, darling? Put your school hat on the rackand wear that instead.” Then the platform seemed
to move backwards and
all she had time to say was, “Good-bye darling and thank you a million times for this and listen: before I come back I'll have made Granny love you just because you’re the most marvellous, wonderful father in the world. And Happy Christmas, Daddy, I”

He was lost now among all the other waving people on the platform. She could see him no longer. The station lamps threw down long, yellow cones, like the

lights in a circus tent, and then the long train swung over the points and round a curve and the station had disappeared. She had started on her great adventure.

When she sat down, four ladies at the other end of the compartment smiled and nodded at her; but as she felt a little choky and did not quite trust herself to speak, she just smiled in return and tried to feel very much older than eleven. Then she took off her blue felt hat and looked properly at her wonderful, grown-up present.

It was a soft, golden head-scarf, and as she spread it out over her lap she saw that it was covered with exciting little pictures with the word “London scrawled across each corner. When she looked more closely at the pictures she recognized them as scenes of London. Here was the Tower Bridge, and Big Ben with its clock saying five minutes past twelve. The dome with the cross on the top must be St. Paul’s Cathedral, and there was a picture of a London bus, and another of a statue of a little boy, poised on one foot, with wings sprouting from his shoulders, and who was just about to shoot an arrow. Then there was a street barrow piled with flowers being served by a funny woman wearing a big hat. And another of a noble archway which she guessed correctly to be the Marble Arch.

It was certainly a lovely scarf and a most wonderful surprise present! For a few minutes she forgot the “Good-bye” part of her holiday. Perhaps that was

why her father had kept the parcel hidden until the last minute ?

“Put it on, my dear. Try it,” the lady in the far corner said. “It looks a very beautiful scarf.”

So Belinda knelt on the seat, folded the scarf corner to corner, and tied it over her fair hair. She was

rather shy about doing this, but the others were so nice and understanding that it was not long before she was telling them all about her new adventure.

It was dark now and very hot in the compartment as the long train roared through the Black Country, and soon Belinda was soothed by the song of the wheels and closed her eyes. From far away she heard the voices of her four travelling companions, but all the time the steady rhythm of the wheels made a pattern in her head. It was funny, but if you thought of a tune and hummed it in your mind it fitted the song the wheels made. Sleepily she tried another tune and it still fitted. Then she nodded, and slept a little, but woke soon as the brakes went on and changed the rhythm. She sat up suddenly at the sound of a sharp report outside, and the lady opposite said, “Fog, I am afraid. That’s bad. Are you going through to Euston, my dear ?”

“Yes, I am, My Granny will meet me there.”

“You'll be all right then, as long as you stay where

you are. We’re getting out soon.”

After this the train grew slower and slower and stopped many times at stations where nobody got in or out, Once, when Belinda opened the window, the cold fog poured into the carriage and made them all cough. The world outside the world of friendly woods and fields, of farms with lighted windows, and little towns was blotted out by a clammy, cold blanket. And all was so very quiet! When she leaned from the open window there was no sound but the gentle hiss of steam from the great engine and the murmur of voices in the next compartment. Then, as she listened intently, there came the noise of a falling signal, a peevish whistle from the engine, and they started off again through the fog.

Belinda did not like saying “Good-night” to her four friends when they got out at the next big station. Nobody else took their place, and she felt lonely and a little frightened as the train crawled forward again. She tried to read her book but could not settle down to it, and then she ate an apple. The ticket-collector came in and clipped her ticket.

“By yourself, missy? he smiled.

Belinda nodded. “I don’t have to change for Euston, do I? Granny is meeting me there.”

“No change. Just sit tight but you'll have to sit a long time in this fog: we’re an hour late already.

So long! I'll be back to see you presently.”

Then Linda leaned back and closed her eyes and let the wheels sing to her again. That song was very soothing. She wondered what her father was doing. He would be home by now and wondering where she was, Then she tried to imagine how her Granny would look and what her big house near the River Thames was like. She made up her mind too to tell the old lady about her father and what a wonderful man he was, and then perhaps he would be asked to come for Christmas Day after all. It was, of course, rather grown-up to be asked away by yourself like this, but it would have been perfect if Daddy had been with her, This was the first time she had spent a night away from him since her mother had died three years ago. Mother was becoming rather difficult to remember, but there was nobody so real as her father, whom she had looked after for so long.

Another fog signal exploded. The train stopped again, and she took off her beautiful scarf and looked lovingly at the little pictures. It was going to be a very peculiar Christmas for her, but there couldn’t be a nicer or more exciting present than this. It was

odd to think that on the third morning from now it would be Christmas Day in a strange house just with an old Granny whom she could hardly remember. Daddy had said that perhaps she would give a party for her only grand-daughter, and that if she did it was sure to be very important and expensive. And it was

while she was thinking about parties that her head slipped against the window and she slept again. ...

Once or twice she realized dimly that the train had stopped; and then that strangers had come into the stuffy carriage, but she was so tired that she did not wake properly until she heard her name called.

“Wake up, my dear! Wake up! It is Belinda, isn't it? But I’'m sure it is, for Mrs. Hawkins told me how you’d look with your fair hair and two plaits. Wake up, Belinda, my dear, and put your things together for we’re getting out in a minute,”

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. A pleasant-faced woman was sitting in the opposite corner smiling at her. Linda rubbed her eyes again and stared quite rudely at the stranger. For she was a stranger, and she was quite certain she had never seen her before. And yet the woman knew her name and was telling her to wake up! Certainly she wasn’t her Granny, although she was dressed in black. She was much, much younger, of course.

Now she was speaking again

“You are Belinda, aren’t you? And you’re on your way to stay with your Granny, Mrs. Hawkins, in her new house in London? You left your Daddy in Birmingham, didn’t you?”

Belinda nodded.

“That’s quite right, but it sounds like magic to me. How do you know and who are you?”

“I’ll tell you everything in a few minutes when we're in the car, but we’re running into the station now and have to get out.”

“Is it Euston ?” Linda asked, feeling that what was happening wasn’t real at all. “And who are you, please. Has my Granny sent you ?”

The woman reached up and pulled down Linda’s case from the rack.

“Listen, my dear. This train is already over two hours late. It has been foggy in London all day, and your grandmother asked me to come and try to find you on the train.”

“But how could you find me? How have you got here? Who are you?”

The woman took the little girl’s hand.

“Your grandmother’s chauffeur brought me to Tring when we found out how late the train would be. 1 waited, and he has taken the car on to Watford and will be there, at the station, ready to whisk us into London in comfort.”

The train was slowing down again.

“Here we are. Just follow me and we’ll soon be out of this. I’ll take your case.”

Almost before she realized what had happened and she was still only half awake Linda found herself jumping on to the platform of a busy station. The fog was still thick and yellow and it was very cold. The pleasant stranger held her firmly by the hand and hurried towards the crowded exit.

“Don’t worry about your ticket, my dear. Just keep it safe in your purse, as you booked through from Birmingham. I got one for you to save time and trouble. I want to get you home as quickly as I can. Mrs. Hawkins will be very cross and displeased if we’re a minute later than we can help. Just hold

on tight to me and we’ll soon be through what did you say ?’

“I'm so sorry,” Linda panted, “but I've left my hat in the train. It was on the rack, I know. Have I got time to run back for it ?”

The woman stopped so suddenly that an elderly gentleman ran into them from behind. For a moment she looked really startled.

““‘That was stupid of you, Belinda,” she said sharply. “Very stupid. I told you to get your things together.

Of course you must have your hat"

But even as she was speaking the train began to move and there was nothing else that they could do.

“1 forgot it because I’m wearing this lovely scarf my Daddy gave me. I’m sorry I was so careless.”

“Oh, well, it can’t be helped, I suppose! Come along,” and Linda’s hand was grabbed firmly again and she was rushed along the platform rather as Alice Through the Looking-Glass was towed by the Red Queen!

Then they were outside in what she imagined to be the station yard, but the fog was so dense that she could see nothing except a few hazy lights above her head. The roadway was invisible and people were banging into each other on the slippery pavements. The fog smelled of dirt and smoke, and suddenly Linda felt very tired and unhappy. This was not how she had expected to begin her holiday. Her companion seemed pleasant enough except for speaking so sharply just now when she was cross about the hat. But it was very odd that Granny should send someone like this to meet her. And she hated the fog. It hurt her eyes and her throat and made her cough.

“Come along, child, and don’t drag,” her companion said crossly as she stepped off the pavement.

“I’m sorry,” Belinda puffed; “but do we have to

rush about like this? Where’s the car, please? I'm tired and I'd like to go to sleep again.”

“Nonsense! Of course you can’t go to sleep. I don’t see the car here yet, but we can’t wait for it.

“Can’t wait? What can we do then? Can we go to Euston? I'd much rather go to Euston, because although it’s very kind of you to come and meet me I'm sure my Granny will be waiting there for me. . . Please let us wait in the station. I’m afraid we'll be run over here. Why can’t we wait ?”

“Because I say so,” the woman snapped. “Your grandmother is sitting at home waiting for you, and as the car isn’t here we must go by Underground. That will be safer and quicker.”

“Is it far, please? How can we find it ?”

But to this the woman made no answer except to hold the child’s hand more closely as she plunged again into the fog.

The next hour was a nightmare. It was not long before Linda’s courage had nearly vanished, for she soon realized that the strange woman who held her hand so firmly was not a friend. Relentlessly she dragged her through the slippery, black strects, saying little besides warning her not to talk nor cry. Often they blundered into other people who were groping

through the fog themselves, and sometimes they crossed streets by traffic lights that could only be seen a few yards away. Once Linda was sure that they came back to a road-junction which they had passed ten minutes earlier. When she protested that she had a stitch and must rest, the woman stopped, put down Linda's case, and pushed her against a wall.

"Listen to me, child, and then keep quiet," she

said. "We've got to keep moving, else we'll never get there."

"Where ?" Linda said, as bravely as she could.

"That's what [want to know. Where? Are we going to my Granny now, and if you can't find the Underground station as you said, why don't we ask someone ?"

"No one to ask," the woman snapped. "I know the way, so you just keep your mouth shut. We'll soon be there."

Just for a moment Linda wondered if she should make a dash for freedom, but as soon as the thought came into her head she realized that if she ran into the fog she would be lost in ten seconds in a town of which she knew nothing. It would perhaps have been wiser if she had risked this, but she could not possibly know what was waiting for her only half a mile away. So all that she could do when she was dragged forward again was to fight back a sob and try not to think too

much of her father, or of the little house with the almond tree in the front garden where he would be sitting by himself now and wondering how she was. She hated London if this was a part of London and she had no wish to see her grandmother, although her companion kept on saying how pleased Mrs. Hawkins would be to greet her when they did arrive.

Soon the fog cleared a little and it was possible to see across the wide road. The woman seemed to know where they were, and looked down at Linda with a grim smile.

“Nearly there now,” she said, and crossed the road towards a low stone wall flanking the opposite pavement. Linda could see no sign of an Underground station, but it did seem as if the road rose to the hump of a bridge ahead of them. Perhaps the bridge crossed the railway.

They had reached the wall by now, and suddenly the woman tossed Linda’s case over and said fiercely, “Over you go, and be sharp about it. Don’t argue, child! Get over! This is a short cut.,”

“I won’t,” Linda said suddenly and defiantly, “I won’t get over. This doesn’t lead anywhere. I hate you, Let me go! If you don’t let me go I’ll shout”

But before she could finish she found herself lifted in strong arms and heaved over the wall, where she stumbled over her suit-case and fell on her hands and

knees. She was only eleven and it was not surprising then that in the foggy darkness she could not check the tears that were streaming down her face. For a moment she stayed where she had fallen. Through her gloves she could feel the wet, cold earth between her fingers, and there was a pain in her knee which sharpened when her companion helped her to her feet.

"Stop snivelling," the woman said, "I know where we are now. Come on."

Linda gulped back a sob. She wished she knew where she was! Behind her she could hear the muffled rumble of the traffic from the road, but besides that there was only the sound of heavy drops of moisture falling from the bare boughs of the few scarecrow-like trees between which they were standing. When they moved forward a few steps it seemed to grow a little lighter. A low building it looked like a wooden shed loomed up on their right, and then they both stumbled over some loose stones. The woman stopped suddenly and, quite unnecessarily, said, "Quiet!" Linda's arm hurt where it was being gripped, and her teeth were chattering with cold and fright. When she looked round it seemed as if they were surrounded by grotesque, ghostly shapes that moved and wavered

in the eddying fog. They stepped forward again a few paces, and then Linda realized that they were in a builder's yard and that the strange shapes were stacks of timber and piles of bricks. It was just at

that moment that she sensed somehow that she was near water and heard, faint and far away, the jerky sound of a mouth organ playing, “Oh, what a beautiful morning” laughed shortly and started forward again. Suddenly
a long, narrow shape stretched before them in the fog and the mouth organ sounded very near. At the right-hand end there appeared a glow of orange light, and suddenly Linda’s captor put down the suit-case, grabbed her arm more fiercely than before, and yelled,

“Elsie! That you, Elsie? We’re here, Elsie I've got the kid, and you’d better be off right away. I've got to go.”

The mouth organ stopped, the orange glow of light

widened and then was blotted out by the shape of an enormous woman. Linda’s hand fiew to her mouth to stifle a scream as her companion said sharply, “Get up, child! Up you go and don’t argue!”

The giantess towered over them and stretched out a great arm. Suddenly Linda realized that the long narrow shape was a boat of some sort and that she was being lifted aboard. On her left was the opening to a tiny cabin which was warmly lit by an oil lamp. To her right, where the big woman was standing, was the long wooden arm of what might have been a rudder. When she strained her eyes through the gloom Linda thought she could distinguish the shadowy outline of another narrow boat behind the first, but before

she could ask any questions her suit-case was dumped on the strip of deck at her feet and the woman in black who had brought her from the train called;

“Watch her, Elsie, and don’t stand any nonsense! She’ll be all right if you don’t spoil her. And send the other round early to-morrow and don’t trust it to the post, he says. Be sure of that, he said.”

The woman beside her grunted something, and then pushed Linda in the back so that she stumbled down two narrow, steep steps into the cabin, For a minute she was dazzled by the light, and then she realized that she had never been in so small a room where so much was crowded together. The first thing she noticed was that the walls were covered with china | plates and dishes and gleaming brass. There was a - bunk on the right and a tiny cooking-stove with a chimney running up through the roof opposite the the door. And whenever any woodwork showed it was painted with amazing red roses and fantastic, turreted, fairy-tale castles.

She turned as the big woman squeezed down the

narrow steps into the cabin. For a moment Linda forgot her fear and anger as she wondered how there could possibly be room for them both and the stove in this narrow space. But there was room, and although the woman was so large she was not clumsy. Linda shrank back against the bunk and sat down suddenly as the woman loomed over her. Her captor’s untidy

hair was red. Her eyes and her mouth were the only parts of her person that looked small. She was dressed untidily in shabby black, but as she looked down at the little girl her glance was curious rather than unkind.

Then she spoke and her voice was strangely soft almost a whisper.

“Just behave yourself, my dear, and you’ll be all right.”

Linda hated her: hated that soft, lisping whisper and the little eyes in the fat face,

“Where am I? Why are you keeping me here? Let me go, please. I've got to meet my Granny at Euston.”

“We knows all about that. Don’t you worry. You’ll see your Gran soon enough. Don’t be a nuisance and you'll be all right.”

“But where am I? What is this boat? Where are you taking me ?”

Suddenly the little doors were flung back again and a dark, handsome girl of about twenty came down into the cabin. She lit a cigarette and looked contemptuously at Linda.

“So that''s the kid that all the fuss is about,” she

began in a harsh, brazen voice. *I'll tell you where you are, kid. You're on one of the narrow-boats that fools call barges, and you're on the water some way between Birmingham and London. That’s a smart

scarf you've got on let’s have it,” and she leaned forward and snatched Belinda’s lovely “Scarf of London” from her head and tied it over her own. But before she could fix the knot under her chin, little Linda forgot everything except an overwhelming fury and hatred of the girl who had stolen her father’s present from her. She jumped from the bunk and somehow squeezed past the huge bulk of the red-headed woman, and flew like a cat at the thief. Sobbing, but still fighting, she was pushed back on to the bunk easily enough as the girl laughed at her and ran up on to the deck.

Suddenly there came the throb of a heavy motor,

and the boat began to tremble before beginning slowly

to move.

“That was just plain stupid,” the fat woman whispered. “Just plain silly to go a-tiring yourself out like that, Don’t you worry too much "bout that girl of mine. I’ll get your scarf back for you some time. All you got to do, love, is to keep quiet and you’ll come to no harm. Just sit there nice and comfortable, and I’ll pour you a cup of nice tea,” and she turned to the stove as Linda leaned back in despair and covered her

face with her hands.

And because she was too tired and scared to peep through her fingers, she did not see the fat woman feel in her pocket and then shake, from an old envelope, some white powder into the mug of tea which she held out invitingly to the girl.

Chapter 2.

The Duchess and the Bishop.

By seven o'clock on the evening of the day when Belinda set out from Birmingham, the fog at Euston Station was so dense and yellow that the lights hanging from the roof could scarcely pierce the gloom. It was very cold, and the arrival platforms were crowded with anxious people waiting for trains that were crawling south already very late, Some tried to keep warm by stamping up and down, others pushed into the waiting and refreshment rooms, but the largest crowd was round the enclosure facing the "Train Arrival" indicator.

Although Christmas was only three days away it was not a cheerful crowd. Strangers jostled and glared at each other and peered over shoulders, and when anyone did speak it was to grumble about the fog and a railway that could not run its trains to time.

At the back of the crowd a short, smartly-dressed man with a rolled umbrella hanging from his arm, was

particularly annoyed because the platform number had not yet appeared against the train he had to meet.

“Perfectly scandalous!” he muttered, and then somebody behind him giggled. He was an important little man and did not like being laughed at, so he turned quickly to see a girl of about sixteen smiling at him. He opened his eyes in surprise, but beforc he could say anything she spoke:

“I’'m so sorry, I hope that didn’t sound rude, but we've been waiting here an hour already for the Birmingham train, and when you said that it was scandalous we were thinking it was worse than that! Can you see the board for us, please? Does it say how late it is yet?”

The man’s ill-humour vanished, for the girl’s smile was infectious, and she looked friendly. She was slim and straight in her belted camel coat, with a scarlet beret set on the back of the black hair which fell to her shoulders in a page-boy bob. Her eyes were grey and steady and the mouth sensitive and pretty. The younger girl at her side was probably a sister and good looking in a different way. Her hair hung in two thick, tawny plaits, and she wore a scarlet scarf round her head.

The man raised his hat and turned again to peer at the indicator; but before he could answer the two girls there was a disturbance in front of him, and a small boy with a bright green school cap and a dark overcoat

wormed his way through the crowd. He knocked the neat umbrella from the important gentleman's arm, caught it before it fell, and returned it with such a friendly grin that there was nothing to do but smile in return.

"Sixty minutes late at Tring," the small boy panted. "Lucky I've kept in training this term, 'cos that was worse than a rugger scrum." He turned from the two girls, who were obviously his sisters, and then looked up at the smart gentleman.

"I say, sir! If it's an hour late at Tring, how much later do you think it will be here? It's difficult, isn't it? I had a problem a bit like that at school this term, but one stupid train had to pass another and I never got it right. What do yon think, Mandy? I think

we'd better go and get another bun. I don't suppose I mentioned it in my letters, but we've been just about starved this term."

"It's the one thing you did mention, Tim," the younger of the two girls said as the three turned away. "All you write about is your stomach. You're a disgusting, greedy little boy and I'm growing tired of waiting for this train] Suppose those two boys are not on it after all ? What do we do then, Mandy ?"

"Go home," her sister said tersely; "and if they've got any sense they'll ring up when they do arrive, and we'll tell them how to get to us. I gave Guy the

number.”

“It will be fun seeing them again hi, Tim! Come out of there! Can't you stop him, Mandy? It’s unhealthy the way he eats buns, and I hate that Refreshment place, It's too stuffy.”

“Maybe, Prue! But it’s warm. Come on in and we'll have yet another cup of tea.”

Tim wriggled his way up to the counter and then beckoned for help to carry two cups of tea, three buns, and one glass of ginger-beer. Then they found a corner table, sat down, and laughed at each other over the drinks which they did not really want.

These three are the Jillions Amanda, Prudence, and Timothy. They live in the upper part of an old house on a corner of Chelsea Embankment with their father, who is a commercial artist. Mrs. Jillions died some years ago, but Mandy, in particular, has kept the home together and found time to pass her School Certificate and swim and play hockey for the big High School to which she goes daily with Prue. Tim, who is eleven, goes to boarding-school, and only arrived home for the holidays to-day.

Privileged friends call this happy-go-lucky but

delightful family the Jillies”. Mr. Jillions is known to his children as “J. D.”, which stands for “Jilly Darling”.

This cold and foggy evening the Jillies are waiting to meet Guy and Mark Standing two friends whom they met on a spring holiday at Blakeney in Norfolk, and who shared with them an exciting adventure' who are now to spend the Christmas holiday with them.

Tim stuffed the last remnant of his fourth bun into his mouth, brushed the crumbs away, and spoke in a somewhat muffled voice across the table to his sisters, who regarded him with mingled suspicion and affection.

“Well I suppose it’s all right these chaps coming for Christmas ?” he began. “I mean, nobody asked me what I thought about it.”

“Didn’t we ?” Mandy said in shocked tones. “How awful of us, Tim! Will you forgive us?” and she turned and winked at Prue.

“Oh, I don’t really mind, but we generally do all right on our own, specially at Christmas. Of course these chaps are all right, but what do you think we'll do with them all the time? It was different up at Blakeney because there we were having a pretty good adventure, but you can’t do that sort of thing in London. Nothing like that could happen to us down here to pass the time. Do you girls see what I mean ?”

Mandy got up and pushed back her beret.

“I don’t know what they teach you at school. You can’t seem to speak English properly, and you don’t

talk sense. Come on! Let's get out of here.
It smells. I prefer the fog. Surely that train will be signalled now ?"

Tim picked up half a bun which Mandy had left, stuffed it in his pocket, and followed his sisters to the door.

"And another thing, young Tim," Prue said over her shoulder: "it's time you were in bed on your first night home. You're excited."

Tim pushed in beside her in the revolving door.

"You can say what you like, Prue. I don't care.
It's grand to be home," and three united Jillies went out into the fog again.

Two long-distance trains had arrived, but there was no further news of the Birmingham arrival, and they walked up and down the long platforms stamping their feet and blowing on their fingers while Tim pestered his sisters with questions as he always did on the first day of the holidays. Suddenly Prue nudged him so violently that he hiccoughed.

"Be quiet a minute, Tim. Do you see who that is, Mandy ? Surely it can't be the Duchess out in this weather"

"But it is," Mandy agreed. "How odd! And there's

her faithful retainer walking just behind."

"What shall we do when she turns round and sees us ?" Prue asked.

"I'll just bow and say 'Good evening," gracefully, but I don't suppose she'll take any notice."

"What are you two talking about ?" Tim said loudly. "You sound crazy to me."

Mandy put a hand on his arm.

"Stop here a minute, Tim, and we'll tell you."

They stood back against a tobacco-kiosk. About twenty yards ahead of them a little old lady in a black fur coat and black hat was walking slowly, with the aid of a stick, through the crowds. She walked straight ahead, and although many turned to watch her progress she seemed oblivious of her surroundings. The man walking just behind her was also dressed in

black and wearing an old-fashioned bowler hat. He reminded Tim of an attendant at a funeral.

"Well," he said at last, "tell me about them if there's anything to tell, although I can't see what they've got to do with us. I wish that train would come."

Mandy began.

“Do you remember that big house facing the river just round the corner from us, Tim? Number 49, I think it is. It was empty last hols. for a bit, and then, one day, someone came and put up curtains, and just before you went back the furniture vans arrived.”

Tim nodded gloomily and fingered the portions of bun in his overcoat pocket.

“Go on then.” he said, “Start the story if there is one. They're turning round now and coming back. She looks pretty miserable, doesn’t she ? Why doesn’t the man walk with her? He looks a bit like a Bishop who came to preach to us last term.”

“I’ll tell you why he walks behind,” Prue interrupted dramatically. “We think the old lady is a very important personage p’raps she’s some sort of royalty in disguise, from another country and the man is her faithful bodyguard and servant who has helped her to escape persecution. I expect he sleeps across the threshold of her room.”

“On the mat, I suppose!” said Tim scornfully. “I think he’s a silly ass if he does. How do you know, anyway?.”

“She doesn’t know, Tim,” Mandy broke in. “She’s just making it up as she always does. Anyway, that mysterious old lady has come to live at 49. We call her the Duchess and she’s an awful snob and looks down her nose at everybody. She knows quite well

who we are, but she pretends we're not there when we meet her"

"We've made up all sorts of stories about her, Tim," Prue interrupted, "and even J D has been rather rude about her. She really is a mystery. We're sure she just lives there with that man and his wife, who we suppose is the cook."

Tim yawned. "I don't see that it matters, anyway. They're nothing to do with us. Here they come now. What's her name ?"

"She's Mrs. Hawkins, I asked the postman one day if he knew her first name, and it's Amelia!" and here Mandy stepped forward, smiled, and said politely,

"Good evening, Mrs. Hawkins. Isn't it a horrid day? Are you waiting for a train, too ?"

The old lady turned, looked Mandy up and down, nodded briefly, and walked on; but Prue, who was watching carefully, was as sure as she could be that the man, two paces behind, winked at them,

Tim laughed. "She made you look a bit silly, Mandy."

"I've tried to be friends," his sister said. "The very day they moved in I went round and asked if I could help'

“That was because you were nosy,” Prue added. “You know it was, Mandy. You’re always nosy about new people.”

“Anyway she snubbed me then and now she’s done it again, and I shan’t forget it. That manservant you called the Bishop isn’t so bad though. His name is William, and I see him sometimes; and although his smile is always very sad and restrained, he raises his hat and calls me ‘Miss’.”

Suddenly Tim dashed forward. “The platform number is up,” he yelled. “Come on! Everybody’s rushing.”

The Duchess and the Bishop were soon forgotten as the Jillies dashed across to the far platform into which the Birmingham train was already gliding. Suddenly Mandy stopped and grabbed her sister’s arm. Her cheeks were rather pink as she said, No need to rush, Prue. I’m not going to let Guy and Mark think that we're running to meet them. We've waited about two hours. Let’s wait another few minutes,”

“But they might miss us; and they don’t know the way,” Prue protested.

“They’ll find us, Prue,” said Mandy, wise for her years. “Let young Tim go and look for them. We’ll be over here, Tim, in the taxi queue. J D said we could take a taxi.”

Tim looked at his elder sister uncomprehendingly, and then dived into the crowd and emerged triumphantly a few minutes later with two bigger boys.

Guy Standing was just seventeen: tall, hatless, and bespectacled, but with a cheerful grin of welcome for the two girls he had not seen for eight months.

“Hallo, you two! Sorry about the train. All right! Don't tell me. I know we’re two hours late, and it’s jolly decent of you to wait. Good idea too, to get in the taxi queue. Thanks awfully.”

Mandy’s cheeks reddened as he went on:

“How are you both? Must say you’re growing up ’specially you, Mandy! Quite a big girl now.”

And now Prue broke in:

“It’s wonderful to see you! We're so thrilled you both could come. You've no idea how we’ve been talking about you and looking forward to this Ow! You trod on my foot, Mandy. Do be careful!”

Then Mark, aged thirteen, had a turn.

“Lucky we saw young Tim so quickly. He was dashing about the platform through people’s legs like

a startled rabbit. What do we do now? Sorry to

mention it so soon, but I'm hungry."

This made them all laugh, and Mandy was particularly pleased of some diversion because she was feeling rather foolish. Of course she was pleased to see the boys, and just to make up for her stupidity she slipped between them and tucked an arm through each of theirs and said, "This really is grand. How did you manage to persuade your parents to let you come at Christmas ?"

"Mother wasn't too keen," Mark admitted; "but Father persuaded her that she would be able to have a real rest at an hotel, and that did the trick."

The fog was still very thick, and only a few cab drivers were prepared to take the risk of driving through the gloomy streets. But the children passed the time happily enough, for they were all good friends and there was plenty to talk about. Tim, who secretly had a great admiration for Mark, made a fine gesture and passed him the half-bun he had been keeping in his pocket for an emergency. Then he ran off to the buffer for further supplies, and at last they reached the top of the queue.

"Where are you going?" the next driver asked suspiciously. "I've 'ad about enough o' this to-night."

"Oh, please? Mandy pleaded. "Please don't desert us now. We're exhausted and we've got all this luggage, and my father will be so worried about

us. We were just praying that the next cab would be driven by someone nice like you.”

The man’s expression did not change.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Chelsea, please.”

“Then why didn’t you say so? Jump in. I live down Fulham way, and this is my last trip.”

The journey took a long time. Neither of the Standings knew London well, but although Prue tried to point out the sights, they could not really see anything beyond the back of the red bus behind which they were crawling for most of the way.

At last the cab turned off the King’s Road, and Mandy opened the window in the driver’s cab and directed him home. When they had all scrambled out on to the pavement, Mandy gave him a dazzling smile,

“Thank you so much for taking us. Will you come in and have a cup of tea or something ? I'm sure my father would like to thank you.”

“I wouldn’t have done this trip for anyone but you, my lass and thanks all the same, but I'll be getting back to me own tea now, for the missus I will be worried. Thank you miss, and a Happy Christmas

to you all!”

Then Guy added another coin to those which Mandy had insisted upon giving him.

“Don’t argue, Guy,” she said, “ J D said I was to pay. You’re our guests.”

The Standings had often wondered how the Jillies lived. When they had first met them in Norfolk earlier in the year they had frequently spoken of their home; but it was difficult for the two boys, who lived in a big modern house in the country about eight miles from Wolverhampton, to imagine a flat in a London house overlooking the river. The one thing they were certain of was the affection their new friends had for the few rooms they called “home™.

“Come on,” Mandy said as the cab turned and drove off. “Let’s go into the warm and find J D There’ll be trouble if he hasn’t got the supper ready,” and she led the way up some stone steps with iron

railings each side to a big front door. Tim produced a torch from his pocket while Mandy fumbled with the key, and then they shut out the fog and the cold.

Prue dashed ahead up the stairs, shouting for her father, and the two boys, feeling rather strange and bewildered, followed more slowly with Mandy and Tim. Then a door at the end of the landing opened with a gush of cheerful light and warmth, and Mr.

Jillions, with Prue hanging on one arm, was smiling a welcome.

“Come in, my dear boys. We are delighted to have you here. Come in and make yourselves warm and comfortable. This is not much like Norfolk in the spring of the year, but I am very grateful to you both for coming to spend Christmas with my crazy family. You are very late, and I am afraid the sausages are not what they were an hour ago.”

Who would not feel at home after such a welcome ? When they had shaken hands with their host, the boys were able to look round the jolliest, friendliest room they had ever seen. Opposite the door were long, high windows which, they learned later, looked out across the Chelsea Embankment and over the river. Now they were covered by beautiful dark red curtains which fell to a cushioned window-seat which was littered with papers and magazines and stretched the full length of the room. On the right was a fireplace with a roaring fire, and against the opposite wall a polished refectory table had been laid ready for a meal and brightened by a row of four candles burning in gleaming brass candle-sticks. In one corner was a great radiogram with a pile of loose records on the floor near by, and in another an artist’s easel, bearing an unfinished sketch of a boy’s head. None of the furniture seemed to match, yet nothing seemed out

of place. Bright-coloured cushions were scattered on chairs and over a long divan, and even on the floor,

‘There was but one picture in the room, a print, and that hung above the table a picture of vivid, glowing sunflowers in a pottery vase with the word “Vincent” lettered on the left-hand side. As his eyes caught the beauty and vitality of this picture and, as he looked, it seemed as if the blooms were alive and moving imperceptibly in the sunshine Guy remembered that this was one of the famous paintings of the Dutch artist Vineent van Gogh.

It was a lovely, friendly place, rich with the personalities of those who lived and worked in it, and neither Guy nor Mark ever forgot their first impressions of the Jillies’ living-room, with its mingled smells of food, tobacco, and burning logs.

Then they were taken up another flight of stairs by Tim, and shown their bedroom and the bathroom, which had a geyser that dripped. When they came down again the supper was on the table and Mandy, with pink checks and shining eyes, was already seated before a great dish of crisp, brown sausages and fried onions. The meal was uproarious, and became even noisier after J D had dashed into the kitchen and returned with a string bag full of bottles of ginger-beer.

When they had finished and cleared the table, Prue said, “I've got an idea. Let’s not wash up to-night. Mrs. Gummins will do it in the morning. Let’s put the paper chains and decorations up to-night, because I feel it’s the real beginning of Christmas. Do you

know what, Guy? Mandy went out specially into the King's Road this morning and bought some mistletoe, "

Then followed a fierce and undignified scuffle

between the sisters, which was interrupted by the insistent ringing of the door bell.

"Oh, bother!" Mandy said as she pushed Prue back against the wall. "Who can want us at this time of night? Perhaps it was carol-singers, and it's no wonder we didn't hear them. You go, Tim."

The bell rang again urgently.

"Oh, all right: I'd better go, I suppose. Perhaps it's the laundry, late because of Christmas. Give me the house-keeping purse off the dresser, you cheeky little beast, Prue."

But it was not the laundry.

The light in the hall was dim at the best of times, but to-night the fog was creeping in everywhere so that Mandy was unable to recognize the big man in black who slipped past her into the house as soon as she opened the door.

She coughed and stood back against the wall. The others were only a few steps away upstairs, and the downstairs tenants, who were their friends, were

even nearer; but suddenly she felt unpleasantly alone. The stranger, somewhat grotesque in the poor yellow light and drifting wisps of fog, stared at her for a long moment without speaking. And then, as he opened his mouth, Mandy recognized him and forgot her fears, for surely this was William the “Bishop™, whom they had seen pacing behind his mistress at Euston a few hours ago?

“Thank you, miss,” he said in his rich, slow voice. “Thank you, I'm sure. I was to ask you if you would be so kind as to just step along with me for a few minutes and speak to my mistress ? Mrs. Hawkins realizes that it may be inconvenient, but she would esteem it a favour if you could come at once. The matter is urgent, I fear.”

“But she can’t want me?” Mandy gasped. “Not me? Isn’t there some mistake ?”

“No mistake, miss. You are the elder of the two sisters, 1 am sure? My mistress would indeed be gratified if you would come. She is hopeful that you may be able to help her. I have a torch, miss, and if you could put on a coat I will take you to her at once.”

Mandy stifled a giggle. He looked worried and very serious.

“Very well,” she said, “I’ll come if you’re sure it’s not my father or sister you want?"

“The elder of the two girls,” Mrs. Hawkins said. “Please ask her to come at once. She looks as if she had some common sense,” That's what she said, miss.”

Mandy ran upstairs and flung open the sitting-room door. Prue and Mark were on their knees on the hearthrug, pushing chestnuts into the ashes under the grate. Guy was looking through a pile of her father’s sketches on the window-seat with the latter by his side, and Tim was experimenting with the radio.

“What do you think ? Mandy yelled above the din. “The Bishop has come for me.”

Her father glanced at her quizzically over his pipe.

“What an honour, my dear. Are you sure you know the difference between an ordinary Bishop and an Archbishop ?”

Mandy tossed her head.

“Don’t be stupid, J D! This is serious and urgent,” and she went on to explain what had happened at Euston earlier in the evening.

“Aren’t you scared, Mandy? Do you think I'd better come with you ?”’ Guy teased as she ran out of the room to fetch the red-lined cloak which was part of her school uniform.

William did not seem to have moved an inch while

she was upstairs, but he had his torch ready and opened the door for her as they went out into the night. They turned to the right at the foot of the steps and then to the right again on to the Embankment,

“You might care to take my arm, miss,” the Bishop suggested solemnly. “It is exceedingly dark, and it would be unfortunate if you should happen to slip on the curb.”

Mandy thanked him, but did no more than put a finger on his sleeve until they turned up the steps of Number 49, which was the fifth house along from the corner. William gravely handed her the torch while he pur the key in the lock, and then Mandy found herself actually inside the mysterious house. The hall was lofty, dark and cold. All was quiet but for the ticking of a large grandfather clock in a corner until William said, “Your cloak, miss, and then will you follow me

But Mandy shook her head and pulled her cloak more closely round her as the butler led her up the wide staircase. Their feet made no sound on the soft carpets of the landing. It was a very big house, and they made several turnings before William knocked on a closed door, opened it, stood aside, and announced, as if from the pulpit, “The young lady, madam.”

Mandy found herself at the end of a narrow room which was crowded with old-fashioned furniture. At the far end by a fire, looking very old and frail, was

Mrs. Amelia Hawkins the Duchess. Mandy, with her cloak still clasped round her, stood quite still. Her heart was thudding, and although she was not frightened she was certainly uneasy.

Then, “Come to the fire, my dear,” the old lady said in a harsh voice, Take off your cloak and come and talk to me. It was good of you to come on such a bad night,” and, as if to prove her words, she began to cough violently. Suddenly Mandy felt sorry for her. She was so old and thin and tired, in her black clothes with her black stick by her chair, and she too had been out in the fog for hours.

She ran forward, slipped off her cloak, and dropped to her knees on the hearthrug,

“Why do you want me, Mrs. Hawkins ? What can I do?

The Duchess unexpectedly put out a thin, wrinkled hand and rested it on Mandy’s shining head.

“Kind!” she said. “Very kind. What is your name, my dear? I know who you are, but what is your name ?”

“Amanda Jillions.”

“Well, Amanda, you know I saw you at Euston this evening. Were you waiting for the Birmingham train which was so late ?”

Completely mystified, Mandy nodded.

“And did you meet your friends ?”

“Why, yes.”

Then Mrs. Hawkins leaned forward and spoke huskily :

“Listen, Amanda. My only grandchild, a child of eleven, who is very dear to me, travelled alone on that train but did not arrive at Euston. I was there to meet her, and she knew I would be there. Of course the police have been informed, but I wondered, my dear, whether by any chance I missed her and you saw her ? She is fair, with two plaits, and wearing a blue coat, She is not as tall as your younger sister. Did you see her by any chance? A little girl by herself ?”

Mandy shook her head.

“I’m so sorry, but how could I, Mrs. Hawkins? The crowds were awful. But of course I'll ask Prue and Tim. Besides, we just wouldn’t notice a little girl in a blue coat, would we? Was she wearing anything anyone would notice more than that? Something unusual I mean? What sort of a hat ?"

The Duchess’s voice hardened as she looked over Mandy’s head into the leaping flames.

“Belinda has no mother now, but I have telephoned her father who put her on the train, and he informs me that she may have been wearing over her head a golden scarf with pictures of London on it. I can imagine nothing more unsuitable for a schoolgirl to wear, but that is precisely what I should expect her father to give her. On the telephone he described it as a ‘Scarf of London’! I hoped you might have noticed her, my dear. I am sorry to have troubled you.

She paused, but before Mandy could think of something to say, went on more quietly, “My Linda is a pretty little thing, and now she has gone, and I am afraid. And now you had better go, too but you will ask the others, will you not ?”

There was little that Mandy could say to comfort the old lady. It was a strange story and a horrid night for a little girl to be lost in, Perhaps she had got off at the wrong station, or been told by mistake that she had to change somewhere ?

“Are you sure she hasn’t arrived on the next train, Mrs. Hawkins ?” she suggested.

“They will telephone me at once if she arrives. The police are watching for her. Thank you again for coming in, my dear. Let me know at once if any of the other children noticed her. You can telephone me if that is easier Flaxman 1815. Now William will take you home .” and she pressed a bell-push

by the mantelpiece as Mandy picked up her cloak.

“Good night, Mrs. Hawkins,” she said shyly. “I'm so sorry, but somehow I feel sure that you will find her. I mean there’s no reason for her to disappear, is there? And you’d know if she’d had an accident. And if there’s anything that we and our friends can do to help, you will let us, won’t you? Good-bye.”

Then William appeared, and they went down the stairs in solemn procession.

“Thank you all the same, William,” Mandy said in the hall, “but I can easily go home by myself.”

But William insisted upon obeying Mrs. Hawkins’ instructions, and solemnly fetched his black coat and bowler hat.

“What do you think about this little girl, William?” Mandy said as they went out into the fog again. “Do you think she’s really lost? Mrs. Hawkins is very upset, isn’t she?”

“I fear that anything may have happened, miss,” William replied. “I am gravely apprehensive. I presume you saw nothing of the child at the terminus ?”

“If you mean Euston, the answer is ‘“No’,” Mandy rejoined. “At least, it is ‘No’ until I've asked the others. We’ll ring up if there’s any news and do please ring us, William, if you hear anything tonight.”

“Indeed I will, miss, and your kindness is well-meant and much appreciated. I am extremely worried about my mistress also, who is apt to be a trifle shall we say, eccentric when upset. And to make matters worse, my wife, who looks after the creature comforts of both the mistress and myself, is out for the day and no doubt the fog has delayed her. I cannot leave the house nor take further action until she returns. She is visiting a sister in Surrey, and no doubt the fog has caused havoc on that line also.”

“She said the police knew all about it now.”

“Oh, yes, miss, that has been done. That was done in the station-master’s office at Euston, and now young Mr. Trevor, who is the mistress’s nephew, and a very able young lawyour, has been notified also. A very intelligent man, miss. Very keen and lively, and quite likely to solve every problem in an hour or so.”

Mandy couldn’t help feeling that William did not care much for Mrs, Hawkins nephew, who sounded rather pleased with himself.

“Oh, well,” she said, “here I am home again, and thank you for coming with me. Good-night! We’ll let you know any news.”

From upstairs came the sound of the last movement of Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto, so she left her cloak over the banisters and slipped into the room

as quietly as she could. J D would never permit any of them to talk or interrupt while music was being played.

(“Talk if you want to and listen if you want to, but don’t try to do both at the same time. If you take the trouble to listen, try to do so intelligently and with all your faculties,” he had told them, and they had grown up remembering this wise advice.)

Guy, who was sitting on the hearthrug with his chin on his knees, raised his eyebrows and patted the floor. Mandy put a finger to her lips and slipped down beside him, but not until the Concerto was over did she tell them the strange story.

“It’s all rather odd,” she finished; “but I feel sure the child will turn up. Kids don’t just disappear like that do they, J D? Not in real life I mean?”

Her father knocked the ashes from his pipe into the hearth.

“I hope not,” he said soberly. I suppose you two lads didn’t see a child like that? But if you did, I'm sure Mark wouldn’t remember he’s yawning his head off now. You’d better all get off to bed. Tim, if you can manage to do it without singeing your eyebrows or blowing your head off, go and light the boys’ gas-fire. . . . Sleep well all of you, and we’ll make some real plans at breakfast in the morning. I think I might be able to produce a few good ideas for the holidays. I've got some already.”

On the top landing Guy said:

“Thank you, Jillies, Thank you for everything.
Tell us, how long do these fogs of yours last as a rule?”

“About three weeks,” Mandy said cheekily. “That should just last your time here! I don’t suppose you’ll even see London at all.”

“It would be fun to wake up to-morrow morning and find the sun shining and everything looking fresh,” Mark said. “Let’s see what it looks like now,” and he went over to the landing window.

“You won’t see much,” Mandy said. “Come and sniff.”

She opened the window, and Guy and Mark leaned out with her. The fog was thick, white and clammy.

“The river is right opposite just across the road,” Mandy said. “It’s fun when the tugs and barges come rushing up with the tide, and the sun is shining, and the seagulls fly all round these windows. We love this river and our home here.”

Below them the faint glow of two street lights did no more than change the colour of the fog,

“It’s not really late,” Mark said. “Why is it so quiet?”

They listened carefully, but the fog muffled all

sound but the dripping of moisture from the bare

branches of the plane trees below.

Mandy closed the window.

“Good night, you two. Come on, Jillies the little boys are tired out after their long journey.”

CHAPTER THREE.

Scarf of London.

To wake early in a strange house is always an odd experience. Mark Standing slept well for some hours, and then woke suddenly with the uneasy feeling that something important had happened. He turned on his back and wondered where he was, knowing at once that he was not in his own bed. Then he remembered: the Jillies and their flat in Chelsea! The long train journey in the fog, and the even more exciting journey through the shrouded streets of London in a crawling taxi. The jolly room downstairs with the friendly Mr. Jillions, who was quite unlike anybody he had ever met before, and Mandy whom he liked very much but thought was a little crazy going out later and coming back with a story of a little girl who had disappeared off the Euston train,

He sat up suddenly in bed. Perhaps he had been dreaming? Or had it really happened?

It was very cold and dark, but over by the bed in which his brother was sleeping was a rectangle that was not quite as black as the rest of the room. This must be the window, and as he now realized exactly where he was the memory of what he had been trying so hard to remember came back suddenly and he knew that, even in his sleep, he had been trying to recall something which had happened something which was really important.

He lay back again and closed his eyes, although he was now wide awake. He saw again the stuffy compartment in which they had travelled south yesterday, and remembered how the train had crawled from signal to signal and stopped at many stations. He remembered how he had tried to persuade Guy to come out into the corridor with him and how his brother, deep in a book, had refused. He remembered the crack of the fog signals, the silly chatter of a fat woman in the corner, and how, at last, in desperation, he had pushed past the others and gone out into the corridor. There he had had some fun with two soldiers who were going home on leave, and, with his nose to the misty window pane, he had tried to guess through which part of a ghostly countryside they were passing.

At last, when it was dark, they had reached a much brighter station and a lot of passengers had got in and

out. The lights opposite his window had been strong enough for him to distinguish some of the hurrying people on the platform as they passed through their misty beams. There had been nothing special about the passengers, but for some strange reason Mark suddenly recalled two figures quite distinctly a woman dressed in black, leading a girl a year or so younger than himself hurriedly towards the exit. The woman was carrying a suitcase in one hand and holding the child's arm in the other. Mark concentrated desperately. Surely there was something else which he ought to remember? The girl's face? What was she like? But her back had been to him; she had been looking at the ground. He tried hard to recapture the picture, but the two had passed into the gloom in a flash and not even when Mandy had been telling her story last night had he thought about them. But now that he had remembered, surely there was something else ? Suddenly it came back to him two fair plaits! The girl had had two fair plaits: he couldn't remember a hat, but he was sure about the hair.

He sat up again.

"Guy! Wake up. Something has happened. I've remembered something important."

But his brother only grunted and turned over, so Mark got up, switched on the light, shook Guy fiercely by the shoulder, and jumped back into his own bed out of reach of an avenging arm. Guy was very much annoyed and said so in no uncertain terms.

“There’s no need to get into such a rage, anyway,” Mark said. “I’m sorry, but this is important and you're jolly well got to listen. It’s about that girl that old Mrs. What’s her name told Mandy about.”

Guy looked at his young brother pityingly.

“Try to speak English; try just for this once, so that you can make yourself understood and be as quick as you can because I'm going to sleep again. I think you've suddenly gone off your head! Too much excitement yesterday, I suppose. I was a fool to bring you here,”

Mark gulped; but instead of arguing about something which was not even debatable, he told his story.

When he had finished there was a long silence.

Then, “Nonsense!” Guy said. ‘Just stupid nonsense. You must have dreamed it.”

“No, I didn’t, Guy. Honest, I didn’t. I know it happened.”

“Well, why didn’t you say something about it last night when Mandy was telling us that yarn?"

“I don’t know. I know it seems silly, but I believe I was too tired to think properly, and I just forgot. It’s easy enough to forget, isn’t it? You forget

things sometimes, I suppose? Even the great high and mighty Guy Standing isn't perfect all the time."

"All right! All right, you wretched little boy. You've woken me up properly now. I'll prove that it was all a dream, anyway. What station was it?"

"What station was what?" Mark replied cautiously.

"What station was it where you saw the woman and the girl?"

Mark clapped a hand to his head triumphantly.

"Got it! It was Watford. I know it was. I remember now that I saw the name hanging underneath the platform lamp."

"You're not just guessing, Mark? Honest?"

But Mark persisted. He was certain this time, and at last he convinced his brother.

"All right, then. You didn't dream it. I wonder if that train was supposed to stop there ?"

"I don't know, but I'll look it up presently. Anyway, Guy, I think we ought to go and tell Mandy at once, and she can go and tell that old Duchess round the corner that the girl with the plaits I saw might be the girl she's lost."

“Of course that would create a splendid impression, wouldn’t it ?” Guy said bitterly. “Here we are staying as guests in a strange house for the first time, and you calmly suggest that we should get up in the middle of the night, blunder about somebody else’s home, knocking on doors until we find our hostess, so that we can tell her a crazy story which will persuade her to go out in the fog and wake an old lady up to tell her that a silly little boy she’s got to know saw a girl on the platform at Watford. . . . Turn over again and go to sleep and rest your brain!”

Mark sighed. He was rather tired of being a younger brother. He'd have a talk with Prue about all this later, as he was fairly certain that she suffered from elders in the same way; and anyway she would believe him and help him to do something about it. Prue liked a dramatic story, and an adventure too.

Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps outside, a bang on the door, and in came Mandy with a tray and three cups of tea.

“Haven’t you been to sleep?” she asked, as she realized that the light was on. “Or do you generally get up before this? I've brought you some tea, but we’re sorry it’s late,” and she sat down on the end of Guy’s bed.

She was wearing blue slacks and the scarlet sweater with a polo collar which Guy remembered seeing in Norfolk earlier in the year.

“Mind if I have my cup with you? I’ll just put a match to the gas fire.”

“Mandy,” Mark began breathlessly, “I've got something very important to tell you. You will listen, won’t you ?”

“Don’t say you've decided to go home already?” Mandy winked. “That would be too awful for us. Is Guy going, too?”

“I never wanted to come,” Guy answered, grinning, and Mandy put out her tongue at him.

So Mark told his story for the second time in twenty minutes, and somehow it did not sound very convincing, although he was still quite sure that it had happened.

“You believe me, Mandy, don’t you? Do you think that the girl I saw getting out at Watford is the girl your old Duchess lost ?”

Mandy looked at him shrewdly. His hair was on end, and in his excitement his tea, from his saucer, was dripping on his striped pyjama-jacket.

“I don’t see why she should be, Mark. And yet. Did you happen to see what she had on her head? That’s a pity. She might have been any girl, and it seems rather silly to rush in now and tell the Duchess,

doesn’t it? And why that station? Why Watford? And anyway the girl she's lost was travelling by herself, and no kid of that age is likely to go off with a stranger, is she ? Thanks for mentioning it, Mark, anyhow, but I think we’d look rather silly if we went round and told her that. I don't think she’d be very pleased, Now you’d both better get up, and at breakfast we'll decide what to do to-day. 1 love breakfast in the hols. There’s no special hurry, and we can make all sorts of plans even if we don’t carry them out.”

“How’s the fog, Mandy?” Guy yawned.

“Still seems bad. Maybe it will clear later and we can go out.”

Breakfast with the Jillies was an interesting experience. When the Standings came down Mr. Jillions, who was already dealing with a kipper, waved a piece of toast at them.

“Good morning. Just sit down anywhere, boys. Do you like kippers? Good! Mandy will see about that. She's in the kitchen with them now, and Prue will be burning her fingers on the toaster out there as well.”

Then Mandy called and accused them of slacking; so they did what they could to help, and soon were drifting in and out of the lounge with plates and toast, just as if they had been brought up there. After a while J D lit a pipe, dropped two newspapers on the floor, and wandered out, after telling them all to

behave themselves till evening. Then Tim appeared.

“Sluggard!” said Prue tersely. “Disgusting, lazy little sloth!”

“First day of the hols,” he said peevishly. “Can’t you let a chap alone? You know I'm allowed to stay in bed for a bit on that day.” He turned to Guy and Mark. “It’s awful the way these girls are always nagging at me. I never get any peace here.”

“You won’t get any kipper here, either, unless you go and light the gas under the grill,” Mandy said. “Do you think we’re all going to jump up and wait on you, young Timothy ?”

He grinned at her engagingly, and she got up with an answering smile and went into the kitchen to cook his breakfast. Prue never looked up she was now reading one of the papers but Guy and Mark glanced at each other in amazement. These Jillies!

In spite of her promise, Mandy declined to make any plans because it was still so foggy, but for a long time they sat round the table talking about Norfolk and the birds they had seen there. A cheerful char-woman arrived to wash up, and while the girls were upstairs in the bedrooms, Guy and Mark went over to the window-seat. It was just possible to see the parapet of the embankment on the other side of the road, and every now and then the roof of a red bus or tradesman’s van would come crawling out of the

fog and pass beneath them. No sound came to them through the murk and closed windows, and these slowly-moving phantom shapes fascinated them for a while.

“1 wish we could see the river,” Mark said. “I'm looking forward to that. T believe you can go for trips on the Thames, but I suppose Christmas isn’t a very good time for them.”

His brother made no answer, and after a while Mark kept quiet. He still did not feel very happy about his memory of the little girl with the plaits, although he had made up his mind now not to mention her again. He was beginning to wonder whether it had been a dream.

They stayed in until lunch time, and then, as soon as they had washed up, decided to go out.

“I can’t stick it any longer,” Mandy said. “Maybe it’s not polite to take guests our in the fog, but I've got a headache. Do you chaps mind?”

The Standings had been hoping for a long time for this, so they were very willing. Tim was not amused at the idea, and said that he had something private to do indoors and would be very glad of a little peace and quiet! So they left him alone and went out into the fog and found adventure in two minutes.

Guy said that he wanted to see the river, so Prue

led them to a crossing. It was now so foggy that it was difficult to see the island in the middle of the road. Buses and cars were driving with their sidelights on, but after waiting for a moment or two they made a dash for it. Mandy was the last across, and even as she ran she thought she heard other footsteps just behind her. Just as her foot touched the pavement she sensed a car approaching them and, at the same moment, there came a screech of brakes and a startled cry. Guy turned and grabbed Mandy's arm, and then ran back into the road, where a boy was pulling himself to his feet by the mudguard of a car which had struck him.

Guy stooped and swung the lad on to the pavement, and Mandy put out a helping band, while at the same moment the car drove off.

"Did you see that, Guy? Did you see it? He knocks a boy down and then drives off, Did you get his number ?"

Guy shook his head. He was looking at the boy, whose face was white with pain as he stood on one leg and tried to rub the ankle of the other.

"Are you all right, son? Can you stand on it?" Guy asked.

The boy looked at the children standing round him and then nodded sullenly.

"I'm O.K., I reckons. But me ankle hurts."

He looked to be about twelve years old, and was thin and wiry. He was wearing a shabby overcoat over a blue jersey, and boots which seemed as if they were too large for him. His face was pale and freckled, his nose snub, and a few sandy wisps of hair showed beneath a khaki scarf that was tied round his head and knotted under his chin. He looked and spoke like an urchin, but his lip was steady and his blue eyes fearless as he looked at his rescuers.

“Where do you live?” Prue asked him. “Have you got a long way to go?”

“Just mind your own business,” came the quick retort, “and let me alone, all of you. What are you standing around me like this for? Let me go"
Then he put his twisted ankle to the ground, and his white face puckered with pain.

“Look here,” Mandy said suddenly, “this is just stupid! You can’t walk for a bit, and we live just here; so come and have a warm and a rest and one of us will see you on your way presently. We don’t want to know who you are or anything about you. Why should we? Come on! What’s your name?”

The boy looked, and Mandy’s smile was too much for him. He grinned weakly in reply and then, when Prue said, “Tell us what’s your name, although I’ve got one for you already.”

“So you have, have you? What is it?”

“Sandy,” Prue smiled. ‘It suits you. Come on. Let’s go home, Sandy.”

“Me name’s George, but some of the kids calls me Sandy, so that’s O.K. by me. And thanks a lot" he finished as they helped him to hop back across the road. When they reached the island Guy stopped.

“No nonsense. On my back, Sandy, else we’ll never get there,” and to everyone’s surprise the boy allowed Mark to help him on to his brother’s back.

Five minutes later an astonished Tim had opened the door to them. As soon as he saw Guy looming through the fog with somebody strange on his back, he said, “You've all gone mad, I suppose. You haven't been ten minutes; you come back with somebody I've never seen before though I'm sure he’s really very nice if you've found him,” he added politely to his guests. “But the trouble is, I can’t get any peace or any time to myself in this house, Still, I suppose you'd better come in.”

Sandy was dumped in a chair by the fire and looked round him with wondering eyes. At first he protested when Guy took off his boot, and he tried to bolt when Mandy bandaged on a cold compress. Although it was barely an hour since they had finished lunch, Prue made some tea, and neither the Jillies nor the Standings blinked an eyelid when Sandy poured some

of his into a saucer and blew on it.

After a little he perked up like a half-frozen sparrow which has been brought into the warm. He forgot his suspicion and even began to swank a little.

“I’d like to meet that bloke wot run me dahn,” he said: “I’d tell ’im a thing or two. I'd like to tell ’im wot 1 thinks of 'im,” and here he began to describe the driver of the car in terms which were so uncomplimentary and indeed, impossible that Prue’s eyes widened with horror, while Tim edged forward curiously in his chair.

Mandy changed the subject hurriedly.

“I know, Sandy. We don't like him either. But where are you going, and do you know where you are now ? We want to help you, but it will be dark soon, and I suppose you ought to be going home if it’s a long way, that is.”

Sandy looked round the ring of friendly faces and decided to tell all.

“I lorst me way,” he confessed. “Honest, I never done such a thing before. Fancy me losin’ me way. I I got off the bus up top somewhere, and then I got lost. I got to do a message, your see. A secret message,” and here he looked at Tim, whose eyes sparkled in sympathy.

“Where had you got to take the message ?” Guy asked.

To their astonishment Sandy then lifted his grubby jersey and produced an envelope which was tucked into his belt.

“Any of you know this place?” he demanded. “I got to deliver that afore I goes home. I lives in Rosemary Lane.”

“That sounds a nice place,” Prue said politely. “Where is it?”

“Wapping,” Sandy replied, and Prue was no wiser.

Meanwhile Mandy had taken the grubby envelope and was looking at it as if she could hardly believe her eyes. Then she passed it to Guy and Mark.

It was addressed in an illiterate handwriting to “Mrs. Amelia Hawkins”, at the address that they knew only too well.

“Where did you get this, Sandy?” Guy asked casually. “I mean, have you brought it from a shop? Is it a bill or something like that?”

“I dunno,” Sandy shook his head; “but it’s very, very important and secret. ’Ere, Il tell your all, Come closer. ... A woman at the bus stop by Lime house Church give me ten bob to deliver that there envelope,

and if one of you will show me the way I'll do it right away and be on me way home again."

Guy held on to the envelope as Sandy turned to him.
"I ain't dun nuffin' wrong, "ave 1? I wanted that ten bob to get me Mum a Christmas present! And that woman gimme me bus-fare too, No! I don't work in no shop. That's no bill."

Mandy snatched the note from Guy and passed it back to the boy.

"That's all right, Sandy. Of course you haven't done anything wrong. Nobody said you had. We were just a bit surprised, cos we happen to know this Mrs. Hawkins. She lives nearly next door, and I'll take you round there presently. Have another cup of tea and a biscuit. I believe we've got one or two chocolate biscuits somewhere. Run and find them, Prue."

Even Prue looked shocked at this last suggestion but went off to the kitchen in obedience to a fierce wink from her sister. Tim was heard to mutter something about, "Wish I'd known about them. spose they're locked up, as usual!" but Sandy soon recovered his good humour, and chattered away to them all as he ate the last two chocolate biscuits from the Jilly collection. He was not very easy to understand, but now that he had accepted them all as his friends he talked freely about himself and his home. Wapping, it appeared, was on the north bank of the Thames in

the London docks, and his father was the master of a tug called Happy Days. Rosemary Lane was very near the river, he said.

“Have you got any brothers or sisters, Sandy?” Prue asked.

“Not me! Not likely! I'm best by meself, I reckon. Reckon I ought to go and find that Missus 'Awkins wot it says on that letter now. I promised I'd give it to the lidy meself, your see, so I got to do it, "aven’t I ?”

“Wait for me,” Mandy called, as she ran for her cloak. “I’ll take you, but you’d better try your ankle first.”

Very cautiously Sandy put his bandaged foot to the ground and then grinned triumphantly.

“Blow me, if that ’asn’t done the trick!” he said.

Prue helped him on with his boot, and then, when Mandy came back, they all went down to the front door to see him off. Over her shoulder Mandy said to Guy, “Wait for me, chaps. I won't be long, but T'll ask if there’s any news while I'm there. We'll both come back here, and then we can go with Sandy to the bus.”

Sandy limped a little but got along very well, and
*
was still chattering as they climbed the steps of Number

Forty-Nine. The door was opened by William, looking more ecclesiastical than ever.

“Good afternoon, William,” Mandy began, as her companion gazed at him in astonishment and awe. “This boy has a message for Mrs. Hawkins and I was wondering if you have had any news of the little girl?”

William shook his head sadly. “I'm afraid not, miss. It’s very worrying indeed, but we have heard nothing. If you will give me that letter, young man, I will convey it to my mistress immediately.”

Sandy looked the big man up and down and then shook his head.

“No thanks, mister. I'll take it to her myself. I promised I’d give it to her and so I will. Show us the way, will you, mate ?”

William winced slightly at the “mate”, took a deep breath, and tried again.

“My mistress is distressed and cannot see anyone certainly she cannot be disturbed by unpleasant small boys. Perhaps you, Miss, will persuade this child to hand me that envelope ?”

“Ho, no you don’t,” said Sandy, dodging behind his companion. “I don’t give this up to nobody not even to my girl friend ‘ere.”

Mandy smiled faintly.

“I think, William, that if Mrs. Hawkins would see us just for a moment it would be a good idea. This boy did promise to deliver it personally, you see.”

“But the mistress is not alone. She has her nephew, Mr. Trevor, with her, and must not be disturbed. Doubtless they are discussing this most distressing occurrence. Leave the message with me, my boy. I will see that it is delivered safely.”

Just at that moment a door at the end of the hall opened and a tall man, with long fair hair and a pair of eyeglasses on a black ribbon, came out and stood under the light.

“What is the meaning of this disturbance, William?” he said after a long pause, during which he surveyed the two children very distastefully through his glasses. “Who are these children? Are they begging? Or collecting for something ? Send them away.”

While he was speaking, Mandy felt her cheeks go scarlet with anger. How dared he suggest that they were begging, when Mrs. Hawkins had asked her help only last night? But before she could answer, her companion went into action. He dodged past the indignant William, swerved past the unpleasant Mr. Trevor, and calling triumphantly over his shoulder to Mandy, “Reckon the old lady must be in ‘ere,” dived

through the open door of the room at the end of the hall

In spite of herself Mandy laughed as she followed him.

Mrs. Hawkins was sitting at & round table in the centre of the room. She looked pale and ill and had obviously been crying. Before her was a pile of letters and papers. A big easy chair was drawn up to a fire on the right-hand side of the room, and Sandy was standing on the hearthrug holding out his precious, grubby envelope, while the old lady looked at him in amazement,

“Who are you ?”’ she whispered as Mandy came in closely followed by Mr. Trevor, who shut the door behind him,

“He’s all right, Mrs. Hawkins,” Mandy began: “he is really. He was knocked down by a car just outside, and we helped him, and he’s brought this letter for you. He promised to give it to you and to nobody else, and that’s why he wouldn’t let William bring it in. I showed him the way and wanted to know whether you’d had any news of the little girl ?”

Mrs. Hawkins nodded and took the envelope. Her old fingers trembled as she unfolded the letter. The clock ticked loudly in the silence as she read the message. Then her head slipped sideways and she slumped in her chair and the paper dropped to the

floor.

Mandy, who was nearest, ran to her, while Mr. Trevor picked up the fallen letter. The old lady's face was very white, and she put her hand to her side as Mandy helped her in her chair again.

"The fiends!" she whispered. "I told you; Trevor. You wouldn't believe me, but now you see I was right. Read it, Trevor. Oh, my darling little Linda!"

The man read the letter, stuffed it into his pocket, and then stepped back against the door.

"Now boy," he said quietly, "tell me at once, and quickly, exactly how and where you got this envelope. And no lies, either."

Sandy's pale face flushed.

"I ain't no liar, mister, and you got no right to say so. I dun wot I was asked to do and I earned me ten bob honest. Ask her" jerking his thumb at Mandy: "she'll tell your. I tole her already."

Mr. Trevor's voice sharpened.

"No nonsense, boy. This is serious. You won't get into trouble if you've done nothing wrong. Who gave you this note and where?"

Sandy glanced longingly towards the door. He

didn’t like what was happening at all, and his ankle was hurting him again.

“Let me tell you,” Mandy began. “He told us once, and now you're scaring him and he gets muddled.”

“Oo’s scared? Me? Of ’im? I should smile,” Sandy broke in. “Jest keep quiet and I'll tell you meself,”

Mandy, who was already detesting Mr. Trevor, stood behind Mrs. Hawkins’ chair and listened while Sandy told his story again. He explained how he had gone out after breakfast 1o get a paper for his father, and how he had wandered up the Commercial Road with a pal, and said “Cheerio” to him by the bus-stop at Limehouse Church. He was wondering whether he could afford a comic when a woman came up to him out of the fog and asked him whether he would like to earn ten shillings by delivering a letter. i

“She gimme another two bob extra fer me fares, wot’s more,” he added triumphantly. “Ain’t nuffin’ wrong with that, is there ?”

Mr. Trevor shook his head impatiently,

“Never mind your fares, boy. Would you know this woman again if you saw her ?”

“I dunno. It was foggy and I was only reely lookin’

at the ten-bob note and wonderin® whether it was O.K.?

“Think, boy! Think!”

“I am thinkin’, ain’t I I’m near bustin’ meself, with thinkin’.”

“Was she old or young, or dark or fair, or tall or short ?”

“Dunno. Young, I reckon. Not old anyway.”

“Tall ?”

“No. 'Bout as big as Charlie.”

Mr. Trevor raised his eyes despairingly to the ceiling.

I don’t know Charlie "

“He’s my cousin!” came the answer, quick as lightning.

“Let’s get back to this young woman: was she wearing anything special ? Anything you'd recognize again ? Anything you can remember ?”

“Dunno. Yes, I do, though. She was wearing something special. Something on her head I'd never seen before.”

Mrs. Hawkins stiffened in her chair. Mandy

gasped, and Mr. Trevor glared at poor Sandy through his eyeglasses.

“What, boy? What was it she was wearing? Speak up”

Mandy felt her mouth go dry with excitement and her heart begin to thud,

“O.K.! O.K.!” Sandy went on. “I'm tellin’ your, ain’t 1? She had a yelow cloth thing over ’er ’ead covered with pitchers and the like.”

“What pictures?” Mrs. Hawkins almost screamed. “What sort of pictures?”

“Tower Bridge and London and St. Paul’s and the like, Pitchers of London there were, all over it.”

CHAPTER FOUR.

The London Pride.

BELINDA never knew for how long she slept, but when she woke her head ached badly. Her eyes hurt too when she opened them and struggled to remember where she was. She seemed to be in a very narrow sort of bed, and when she turned her head to the right she saw a small window through which came a little grey light. Apart from this it was too dark for her to sece where she was.

Then she realized that she was still in her clothes

under a blanket and she began to remember the terrors of the night before. She remembered the horrible girl who had stolen her scarf and the fat woman who whispered, but who had been a little kinder when she gave her a cup of tea. The tears squeezed under her closed eyelids as she remembered her father and the Granny who had been waiting to meet her at Euston. Where was her grandmother now ? Was she looking for her? And where was she, herself? She tried to sit up, but her head hurt so badly when she moved that she lay back again. There was a noise which kept thudding too, and a strange sense of movement, which did not make her feel any better. Then she remembered! The girl had told her that she was on a boat on a canal, and the thudding was the noise of the engine that she had heard for the first time last night. Or was it still night ? She opened her eyes again. The light from the little window was already brighter, so perhaps she had slept all night and now it was morning ? But why was she alone ?

She felt very sick and lay back again, but the sound of voices roused her after a while. She was certain she could hear a man talking, but the voice which answered him was very soft. Of course! the fat woman, whispering as usual !

Linda realized now that she was a prisoner; but just why she could not imagine. It was all rather like a horrible nightmare, and if her head had not ached so badly she might have thought that everything which was happening to her was a dream. She lay a little

longer trying to be brave, and then, when it was light enough, slipped her legs over the edge of the bunk and stood unsteadily on the floor. The little stove in the corner was still alight, and the cabin unpleasantly stuffy. Linda felt suddenly that she must have some fresh air. Her shoes were on the floor, so she slipped them on, turned, and pushed back the pair of narrow little painted doors through which she had been thrust last night.

Outside, it was cold and foggy and the light was grey. Only a few feet away, and standing above her, was a strange man. His hand was on the carved handle of a great tiller and he was looking ahead over the top of the cabin roof. He was dirty and unshaven, and a cigarette smouldered between his lips. In the dim, foggy light he looked almost grotesque, for he was very tall and thin. He wore a shabby overcoat and a cap with a shiny peak. Standing next to him the fat woman, who was his wife, was looking bigger than ever, in an old checked coat and with a black shawl over her head. She saw Linda first.

“Better not come out here, dearie. You’ll catch your death out ’ere. Nip back again and put some coal on the stove, and you can ’elp me with the breakfast in a minute.”

Linda shivered and fought to keep her voice from shaking.

“Please let me stay here for a little, My head aches

and it’s stuffy down there. Please tell me when I can go home or to my Granny ?”

The man looked at her directly for the first time, altered his position slightly, and spat the end of his cigarette into the canal. Then he glanced at his wife, but she did not speak.

“Why don’t you answer me? Why don’t you? Let me go home, please.”

The woman leered at her. “Don’t fret yourself so much, ducky. Just you be quiet and do what your told, an’ you won’t come to no ’arm. We all "opes it won’t be long now afore your sees your old Gran again we do 'ope so, don’t we, Bert?”

The tall thin man showed some broken teeth and nodded.

“Where are we ?” Linda demanded. “Just tell me where we’re going ? Why don’t you say something?”

The woman moved she was very quiet and quick for someone so big gripped Linda by the arm, and, quite gently, pushed her down into the cabin again. As she lit the lamp she whispered, “Don’t ask so many questions, ducky. Just do as your told and don’t make no fuss nior trouble, and your’ll be all right understand ? Now fetch me a bit of coal from that locker jus’ outside the door. Put it in this bucket and we’ll soon have breakfast going.”

There was nothing else she could do, so Linda helped to get the breakfast. Her gaoler was a strange mixture, for although sometimes she was so terrifying, at others she was not unkind, provided Linda did as she was told. She was efficient, too, and a good cook, and the porridge she made was thick, sweet, and satisfying, and Linda felt better when she had eaten a plateful and drunk a cup of hot, strong tea. She had been afraid that the hateful man in the shiny-peaked cap and the girl who had stolen her scarf would come down into the cabin too, but she had finished her own breakfast before her companion said:

“Take this mug o’ tea and plate out there to the old man, duckie. Don’t spill it.”

“Must I? I'd rather stay here!”

The woman looked up sharply.

“Why not ? He won't eat your. Take it up.”

Linda shivered at the note of command in the whispering voice, and went up on to the deck. The man she feared was still leaning against the long-handled tiller with another cigarette-end between his lips. He held out his hand for the mug.

“There’s a good girl,” he said. “Put the plate on the cabin top. I’ll be at it when I'm ready. You can bide out ’ere for a bit if you keeps quiet and does as

your told.”

Linda shivered and then turned to face the way they were travelling so that her back was to the man at the tiller. It was much lighter now, and she could see a narrow path along the left-hand side of the canal and the backs of grimy buildings and scrubby little gardens filled with rubbish and broken-down sheds. The only sound to break the silence of the wintry dawn was the steady thudding of the engine of the London Pride as she chuffed ahead through the murky waters of the canal. After a while Linda climbed up on to the roof of the cabin, where she could see better. Ahead of her stretched the long tent of black tarpaulins

over the narrow-boat’s cargo, and close to her were two brass-ringed chimneys one from which the smelly exhaust of the engine puffed and the other from the cooking stove and a big painted can with a lid and a spout and a bowl with a long wooden handle. When she looked back she nearly cried out with surprise to see another long narrow-boat slipping silently through the water close behind her. Then she realized that this boat was being towed by the London Pride, for she could see the strong rope connecting the two. Behind the cabin at the stern of the following boat was the dim figure of the girl who had stolen her scarf.

Suddenly the man behind her did something to the engine and called to his wife in the cabin. The fat woman came out and looked ahead, and Linda saw that they were approaching a lock, the gates of which

were open to receive them. Linda wondered what was going to happen next, and for a few minutes forgot her own troubles as she watched. First, the fat woman took her husband's place at the tiller. The London Pride was now only just moving forward, and the man picked up a shiny-handled metal bar from near his feet and jumped ashore. Then the woman increased the speed of the boat a little, and it began to nose its way into the dark cavern.

Linda looked up to see the dripping walls of the lock above her, and then back to see the second boat sliding up behind them. Surely there would not be room for it in the lock as well ? But there was room, although there were only inches to spare. Fascinated, she watched the girl on the second boat (she could see now that it had no name but only the number 453 painted on the bows) push her tiller hard across as it slid into the lock. As the boat came in the girl hauled in the tow-rope with one hand and coiled it on the deck beside her as the space between the two boats lessened. Meanwhile the fat woman, without a glance at the following boat, had flung a rope round a beam on the gate on her side of the lock. This checked the speed of the London Pride and closed the gate behind them. The girl steering the 453 did the same thing, and almost before she had realized what had happened, Linda saw that the two boats were side by side in the lock with both gates closed behind them, and that the girl she hated was smiling at her insolently only a yard or so away.

“Had a good sleep, kid? You don’t look so smart this morning.”

“Give me back my scarf, you beast!” Linda did her best to keep her voice from shaking. “Give it back to me this minute.”

“Shut up or we’ll have to lock you in,” was the only answer she could get as the girl lit herself a cigarette.

Linda turned to the fat woman.

“I don’t mind what you do to me, but please make her give me back my scarf. My daddy gave it me.”

“If you don’t stop talking you’ll have to go below again,” the woman told her, but did have the grace to say to her daughter, “Stop tormenting the kid, Joyce. We’ve got enough trouble without you adding to it.”

Then came a strange noise from above, and Linda saw the man in the shiny-peaked cap standing at the lock gates in fronr of them. He had fitted the long handle into something in the middle of the gates, and as he turned it quickly there was a clacking noise followed by the rush of water. The London Pride moved a little and then, when he had done the same thing to the other gate, Linda realized that he had opened the sluices and that the water from the higher level of the canal was filling the lock, and that the

two boats were rising as it filled. Soon they were level, and the man jumped aboard, threw down the windlass, and the London Pride edged forward. As her blunt bows touched the gate it swung open and 453 followed.

It was still foggy, but as the daylight strengthened Linda, from her vantage point on the cabin top, could see nothing but drab buildings. Occasionally they passed some wharves, but they had been travelling for an hour before the man said suddenly,

“Get dahn off that. Get inside and stay inside until I tells your to come aht. Get dahn, can’t your, when your told,” and he reached out a filthy hand towards her.

As Linda slipped off the roof and bolted into the cabin, she saw another narrow-boat looming towards them out of the fog and realized that she was to be kept hidden when anybody else was about! The fat woman, who was seated at the table, looked up sharply.

“There’s another boat coming ...” Linda began.

“Don’t you make a sound,” the woman whispered, so quietly that Linda was a hundred times more scared than if she had shouted. “You’ll be sorry, dearie, if you don’t stay put.”

Then the little window was darkened as two narrow-boats passed in the opposite direction. The man outside hailed them. There came a muffled reply

and then the slap of water against the hull of the London Pride as it was struck by the wash of the passing boats.

Linda crouched by the little stove and tried to prevent her teeth from chattering.

“Better stop down here now, dearie,” came a whisper from the table, where the woman was laboriously writing on a scrap of paper. “It’s warmer and more comfy down ’ere. Nasty fog outside. Stay down ’ere and keep me company,” and here she gave Linda a smile that was surely meant to be inviting.

Linda nodded and bit her lip. If only her teeth would stop this silly chattering it wouldn’t be so difficult to be brave. She knew she must be brave. She was going to be brave whatever happened and it was just as well that she promised herself this, for she needed all her courage during the next quarter of an hour.

The woman, with her head on one side, finished the letter she was writing and sat back, slightly flushed with her efforts. She read through what she had written, her lips moving, nodded to herself, and then slipped the paper in the pocket of her apron. Next she looked long and carefully at Linda without speaking and seemed to be making up her mind about something important. Finally she glanced out of the little window.

“We’ll be in the tunnel in a minute, dearie,” she

said softly. “Maybe you won’t like it much. Come and sit down ’ere.”

“Tunnel?” Linda said. “What sort of a tunnel? How can a canal go in a tunnel?”

“This one does. We’re in the dark for a quarter of an hour, like. Right under Islington we goes. Come over ’ere, dearie.”

The woman stood behind her as Linda came over to the table and sat down.

“Anyone ever tell you that you’d pass for a boy without that hair of yours?” she whispered. And then, “Here’s the tunnel, duckie. Sit still and don’t be scared.”

Suddenly they slid into darkness. The window was blacker than night, and the noise of the throbbing engine beat through Linda’s head as the echoes came back from the walls of the tunnel. It was much colder too, and the little cabin was filled with wavering shadows from the flickering oil-lamp that hung from the ceiling. There came too a series of strange thuds on the cabin roof and when she looked up the woman said:

“Only drops of water, dearie. That’s all it is. The water drips off the walls and from the roof all the time.”

“What happens if we meet another boat?” Linda asked. “Can we get by?”

The woman was moving about behind her and there came the sound of a drawer being opened. Then, before she could cry out, Linda felt a fat, damp hand on her head.

“Stay quite still, dearie. Don’t move and you won’t get hurt. No noise now. It won’t take a minute.” Then Linda screamed and jerked back her head as she felt the touch of cold steel against the back of her neck.

“Still, you little fool!” the woman hissed. “Keep still unless you want to be hurt,” and her hand tightened on the child’s head.

Then came a crunching noise, the sharp snip of steel on steel, and a soft chuckle of satisfaction as the operation was repeated.

Linda’s head fell forward on the table as she tried to stifle her sobs. Her hand crept round to her neck to prove what she already knew had happened. Her two plaits had been cut off close to her head!

She gulped, choked back the sob that wowld rise in her throat, and turned round. They were still in the darkness of the tunnel, but the flickering light from the shaking yellow flame of the lamp showed her the woman standing back against the far wall of the cabin.

Linda stared at her until she broke the silence.

“Don’t take on so, child,” the woman whispered. “I ’ad to do it. It’ll grow again. Don’t take it so ’ard and don’t look at me like that. Don’t fret, and we’ll make ourselves a nice cup o’ tea, shall we ?”

Linda spoke very quietly, and although her voice trembled it shook now with rage and not with fear.

“I hate you. I’ve never hated anybody in my life as much as I hate you all. I don’t know why you’ve done this to me, ’cos I've done nothing to you, but I’ll never, never forgive you, and when I tell my father what you’ve done to me you’ll be sorry. ... I’ll never forget what you’ve done and now let me alone and don’t speak to me. If you give me a cup of tea or anything else I'll just throw it on the floor. And I’ll tell you another thing! I’m not afraid of you any more. I suppose I hate you too much,” and she turned her back and stared at the little window which was now beginning to change colour as the London Pride chuffed out into the grey daylight again.

Strangely enough the woman seemed rather abashed and said nothing more to Belinda. She opened the painted doors and went out to join her husband, and then the murmur of voices came to the girl standing rigid, with white face, against the little table in the cabin. Soon after the engine stopped and, when Linda looked out of the window, she saw that they were against a rather dingy wharf. She heard footsteps on

the deck above, and then the girl's voice called out something which she could not hear.

Linda had now made up her mind to get ashore and run away anywhere, at the first opportunity. Anything, any place, or even other strange people, could not be as bad as all she was suffering now; and she was just wondering whether, if she could get out on deck, she could make a dash for freedom, when her three captors came into the cabin. The father's pale eyes flicked over her but he made no special remark, and the woman looked a little uneasy as she passed the note she had written over to him. But the girl stared at poor Linda and then burst out laughing.

"Just look at my little boy friend! Who'd have thought it? You've made a good job of that, Mum."

"Just keep your mouth shut, Joyce," her mother snapped. "The less you have to say, the better; and the sooner you get off on your job the better. Just read that through, Bert. I've written it as plain as I can, and then you can put it in that envelope and Joyce can be off with it. And hurry up, because I'm sick of this job."

While she was speaking, Linda was slowly edging towards the doors, and suddenly she slipped under the man's arm, which was outstretched for the letter, and made her brave dash for freedom. She had no real chance, of course, but she reached the deck before Joyce caught her and dragged her back

into the cabin and flung her on to the bunk.

“That’s quite enough of that, dearie,” the woman whispered. “I warned your, didn’t 1? We’re trying to be decent to your, and now you’ve spoiled it all. . . . We don’t want to hurt your but if there’s any more monkey-tricks like that we’ll just have to make sure that your can’t get out.”

Linda faced them with blazing eyes.

“Do what you like, you beasts. I’m not afraid of you any more. I know you’re my enemies now. I don’t know why you’re doing this to me, but I do know what will happen to you when my father knows what you’ve done to me. As for you " she turned to the girl Joyce “if you come near me again I’ll kick and struggle so that you’ll be sorry. And give me my scarf. You’ve cut my hair off, so let me cover my head up.”

There was a long silence while the three bullies stared at the little girl who dared to defy them. Then Joyce laughed' uneasily and turned to her mother.

“Little spitfire you’ve picked up, Mum. I likes her fer it! Never mind, kid. Don’t take it too hard. We don’t want to hurt your. Just do as you’re told, and you’ll be O.K.”

“I won’t do as I'm told,” Linda stormed. “I suppose you can force me to stay here, but I’ll fight you all the

time. Give me my scarf!”

Meanwhile the man had read the letter, put it in a dirty envelope, and laboriously addressed it.

“If you can’t write, perhaps you’d like me to do it for you,” Linda said bitterly, and the man’s dirty face flushed at the insult. Then he jerked his head towards the door and muttered,

“Come outside, both of your, and we’ll get this fixed. Keep the kid ’ere. She’s safer in.”

Joyce-and her mother followed him out, and as soon as the doors were closed Linda crept up to them and peeped through the crack. She could just see the three of them standing close together by the tiller, and, what was more important, she could hear every word that was spoken.

The man first examined the grubby envelope and then passed it to Joyce.

“Git off right away, my girl. Right now. All bein’ well, we’ll be in in an hour or so and it’s a good thing this fog still holds. Straight to that address girl, and put it in the letter-box yourself, and see that it’s done without any fuss or bother.”

“What do you mean? Fuss or bother? Who’s fussing now, anyway ?”

“You know very well wot I means. Your don’t want to go up to a policeman and ask him the way, and then ask him to watch your put it in, do your ? Be sensible now, girl, and get off right away.”

“I don’t see why I should go traipsing off in this filthy weather,” Joyce sulked. “It’s little enough time I get to meself in London as it is. I never gets no fun like other girls. Why can’t you post the thing? Much safer.”

Her father and mother looked meaningly at each other until the latter said sharply:

“Just do as your told, Joyce girl, and keep quiet and be careful. Orders is orders for you and everybody else, and this fog is a godsend for you.”

“Better give me some cash then. I’ll want it for fares and that,” and when her father had passed something over she went on, “Where’ll I find you later, and what are we going to do with the kid ?”

Linda strained to hear the answer, but the three stepped off the boat to the wharf and out of earshot. Then the man came back and she heard him say, “We’ll be in Joe’s later. Now be off sharp, and don’t make no mistakes. We don’t want no trouble.”

From the cabin window Linda saw Joyce pause to light a cigarette before disappearing into the fog. She had changed her coat and shoes, but was still

wearing the stolen “Scarf of London” over her head. When the woman came back into the cabin, Linda was seated at the table with her head in her hands.

“Now listen to me, dearie,” the woman whispered: “you and me don’t want to quarrel, and whiles you’re with us I want all to be comfortable and no fuss. We all hopes it won’t be long afore your back with your old Gran. I don’t want you to get ’urt, see, and you won’t get ’urt if you behaves yourself and don’t try to get away. Your can’t get away even if your jumped off the boat. Are you going to be sensible now, or ’ave we got to fix your so as your can’t run off ?”

”Fix me? What do you mean?”

“Tie you up; dearie,”” the woman whispered.

Linda was quite sure then that she would be tied up if her captors felt like it, and she knew that if she was so tied her chances of escape would be hopeless. She had made up her mind now that whatever happened she was going to get off this horrible boat and away from these people as soon as possible, so she began to act a little.

“What do you want me to do then?” she said sulkily. “And why did you let Joyce go off with my scarf like that?”

The woman smiled. She seemed pleased that Linda was going to be sensible.

“I’ll get your scarf back, dearie. Never mind about that now. My girl’s a bit ’igh-spirited at times, and she took a fancy to it.”

“If I do as you want, will you promise to give me back my scarf and send me back to my grannie quickly ?”

“Your going back just as soon as we can manage it, dearie, and your shall ’ave your scarf when my girl comes back. There now: I can’t say fairer than that, can I?”

Linda thought that she most certainly could be a lot fairer! But she didn’t remark on this, but merely asked quietly what she was to do.

When she understood what she was expected of her, she nearly lost her courage again and had to bite her lip so hard to keep it from shaking, that it bled.

From a locker under the window the woman produced a dirty suit of blue dungarees and a boy’s tweed cap.

“Now dearie,” she whispered, “off with that pretty jersey and skirt and on with these. It won’t be for

long I promise. Now come along, dearie. No fuss’ we said, didn’t we? I don’t want no fuss and neither do you.”

Somehow Linda managed to make the change; but although she did not cry nor speak, even when the dirty cap was pulled over her poor shorn head, she was shaking so much that there was a suggestion of real kindness in the woman's voice as she said, "Don't take on so, kid. The kettle's on the boil and maybe you can make a pot o' tea while I'm outside, and pour out a mug for Bert and me, and one for yourself too."

Then she picked up Linda's skirt and jersey and went out of the cabin, while a strangely transformed little girl sat staring dumbly through the window. She had still not moved when the engine of the London Pride throbbed into life again and they started off down the canal.

After a little Linda did make the tea, but when she went to open the cabin doors she found them locked or fastened in some way. She banged on them and shouted that tea was ready, and, after a minute, the man opened them and told her to put the two mugs down at the top of the steps.

"And get back inside, kid," he said tersely.

Linda thought it best to obey. The fat woman was not in sight, but was presumably steering the second boat. .

After that, Linda lost all sense of time. Once they stopped again and had something to eat; but she had

no chance of escape then, for one of the grown-ups was always between her and the doors and she was never left when the doors were opened.

Sometimes they went through locks, and in the afternoon, just before dusk, she saw through the window the 453 come up alongside and be made fast to the London Pride. The two boats then went into another much bigger lock side by side, and when they were raised and came out together, it seemed as if they were at the end of the journey.

They were in a big dock which was crowded with vessels of all sizes, and particularly with many pairs of narrow-boats like their own. Even through the closed doors Linda could hear the hooting of tugs, the shouts of men, the rattle of cranes on the wharves, and the throb of engines.

Slowly, but very skilfully, the London Pride and the 453 edged in towards a vacant part of the wharf, and after much shouting and some cursing from their master they moored safely. As soon as the engine was silent and the boats motionless, Linda jumped up and banged on the doors which kept her a prisoner.

“Let me out!” she yelled. “Help! Help me, somebody! I’'m a prisoner!”

Then the man came in and pushed her roughly into a corner of the cabin.

“Shout and scream till your be black in the face, but nobody will take any notice of your ’ere,” he said. “Nobody could ’ear your, anyway. ... But you’d be better off if you’d just stay quiet while we’re waiting to ’ear if your Gran is ready for your.”

“Of course she’s ready for me. You know she is. Why do you keep me here like this and make me wear these filthy clothes and cut off my hair? And why did you let that girl steal my lovely scarf ?”

The man stroked his unshaven chin. “You don’t want to say steal, my lass. That’s a nasty word, that is, and I don’t like it. Never say that word again. . . . We’re goin’ ashore now, for we’ve some business to see to, but your’ll be all right ’ere. Just sit quiet till we comes back and I’m tellin’ your now that the doors’ll be safe shut, so that nobody can’t come in and interfere wiv your! See?”

While he was talking, he kept between Linda and the window, and she was just wondering where his wife was, and whether she dared try another dash for freedom, when she noticed two children standing on the edge of the wharf, looking down at the London Pride. Actually they were only a few feet away; but the little window was so dirty that it was doubtful if they could see into the cabin, although Linda could see them, in the gathering dusk. The girl appeared to be two or three years older than herself, and Linda noticed particularly that she had two thick plaits. The boy was certainly younger, but neither of them

looked like the children who lived round the docks, and they continued to stare curiously at the boats.

Linda was thinking how wonderful it would be if she could only reach the wharf and escape with these nice-looking children, whom she felt sure would help her. But she must have given herself away, for the man suddenly turned and glared through the window himself. In a flash he pushed Linda back against the wall again and slipped out of the cabin, fastening the doors behind him.

“Be off with your!” he shouted to the two strangers. “Get out of" here. Your trespassing, and I’ll have your turned off.”

The two children edged away a little before Linda could shout, and the man came back.

“No funny business now,” he warned again. “I’ll light the lamp and make your all cosy-like and you jest sit ’ere till I comes back fer your and takes your ’ome.”

Linda turned her back on him while he was lighting the lamp. The two children had returned and were still staring curiously at the boats. Suddenly she realized that it would be much better to try to escape when the man had gone and she was alone. And then, perhaps, these children could help her?

Behind her the man cursed as the match he was trying to strike broke off short and then Linda had

her big idea. The window-pane was grimed and filthy, so, as quickly as she could and quite silently, she traced on the dirty glass

COME BACK

and was clever enough to remember that she must use "looking-glass" writing.
*
"If, when he's gone, I hold the lamp close to the window," she thought, "then the light will shine through the letters so that they can be read easily from outside."

She stood as close as she dared to the glass while the man lit the lamp and muttered another warning to her. 'She did not even turn her head when he went out, but while he was fastening the doors from outside she lifted the lamp from its hook and held it close to the window. It was hard to see through, but she thought that the girl outside raised her hand and waved before running off into the dusk with her companion. Although she could not be seen, Linda raised her own hand in return. From overhead came the heavy footsteps of the master of the London Pride but his prisoner had a smile on her lips for the first time since she had left the London train.

CHAPTER FIVE.

COME BACK.

THERE was a long silence in Mrs. Hawkins' sitting-room after the boy, Sandy, had remembered that the head-scarf worn by the girl who had given him the note outside Limehouse Church had been covered with pictures of London.

The old lady sat rigid in her chair, staring at him. Mandy's eyes were wide with excitement, while Mr. Trevor fidgeted with the black ribbon of his eyeglasses. It was so quiet that the noise of a falling coal made Mandy start as she watched the pale-faced boy who had brought them this news.

Mrs. Hawkins spoke at last.

"Trevor! This news proves it. The girl who gave this lad the note must have come from my Linda. I'm sure that scarf must be hers it's as her father described. What are we going to do, Trevor?"

Before the man could answer, Mandy stepped from behind Mrs. Hawkins' chair, went over to Sandy, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"You're sure about that, aren't you Sandy? It's important. You can remember the scarf at this minute can't you, and you're certain about the pictures?"

When the boy looked up at her with a grin and nodded his agreement she turned to Mrs. Hawkins.

"I'm glad we've done the right thing, Mrs. Hawkins.

I thought I ought to bring Sandy along. He was nearly killed, and I think it was jolly good of him to come in all this awful fog to find you. Some people would have taken the money and thrown the note away. Will you tell us what's in that letter, please, Mrs. Hawkins?"

Mr. Trevor, tall, rather superior and pleased with himself, stepped forward, and looked at the two children disdainfully as he said:

"This house seems to have gone mad, Aunt. Who on earth is this girl, and what is she doing here ? This is no job for children. Will you please ask her to go away at once? This regrettable situation must be dealt with by the police under my direction, and we want no interference from outside. Perhaps you would care to go home now, my child ?" he added, and walked over to open the door.

"If he won't tell me what has happened, I would so like you to," Mandy pleaded. "Please do, Mrs. Hawkins. I can tell you that the scarf is almost certainly Linda's, because one of the boys who is staying with us saw a little girl with two plaits walking down the platform at Watford yesterday. He said she had a woman with her; but he only remembered all this in the night, and he told me about it this morning. I'm sorry we didn't think it was important then but if you like I'll go and fetch Mark at once."

"Please, please!" Mr. Trevor complained in a bored

voice from the door. “Please do stop bewildering and exhausting Mrs. Hawkins. This is not a game, and I must ask you again to leave. The boy must stay. I shall want to question him.”

Mandy tried again. She was always stubborn when she was angry, and she was certainly angry at this minute.

“Mrs. Hawkins, please listen just for a minute, and then I’ll go if ’'m being a nuisance. Will you please let us help you to find your Belinda? I’m sure we can. The Jillies are good at helping other people. We’ve done it before and we would love to do it again. I’ve got Prue and Tim at home and our two friends, the Standings, I told you about. We had an adventure together at Easter and they’re grand. And Sandy here will help us too, won’t you?”

But poor Sandy had now had enough of this grand house, these endless questions, and all these queer people. The girl was all right, but he had no time for the others.

While Mandy was speaking, he edged a little towards the door and watched Mr. Trevor very carefully. He noticed that Mandy’s long speech seemed to annoy him, because his pale face grew redder and redder, and when he stepped towards the table Sandy took his chance and made a bolt for the door.

Sandy had been brought up in the streets of dock-

land, and the games he played there gave him plenty of practice in dodging, and had taught him to move quickly. He moved quickly now, slipped under Mr. Trevor's outstretched arm, and was out in the hall before the man could turn round.

"Hi, young Sandy!" Mandy, who did not want to lose him, called. "Wait for me. I'm coming, if we're not wanted here."

Mr. Trevor made no answer to this and, rather rudely, pushed past her into the hall. William was not in sight, but the boy was already fumbling with the latch on the great front-door.

"Stop, boy!" the man yelled. "Come back. Nobody will hurt you. I want you to tell your story to the police."

Sandy turned a white, frightened face from the door. Although he was sure that he had done nothing wrong, he did not want to have anything to do with the police. He knew the policemen of Wapping well enough and was not afraid of any of them, but he wanted nothing to do with the police here. As Mr. Trevor ran down the long hall towards him, he struggled frantically with the catch on the lock.

"Do wait, Sandy," he heard Mandy call. "You'll get lost if you go out in the fog. Wait for me and I'll show you the way."

Then the catch moved back under his fingers, and the cold, clammy fog surged into the hall as he pulled the door open and slipped out. When Mr. Trevor and Mandy went out on to the steps just a moment later, there was neither sight nor sound of him.

“That’s your fault,” Mandy said indignantly. “If you’d left it all to me and let me help, this would never have happened. He just didn’t trust you, and now you’ve scared him and I don’t know how we shall find him again.”

William’s sudden voice behind them made her start.

“Perhaps, sir, I can be of some assistance. Would you care for me to venture out in pursuit of the lad ? It would seem to be important for us not to lose touch with him.”

But the fog was so thick that it was obvious that Sandy would never be found, as none of them knew even in which direction he had run.

Mr. Trevor shrugged his shoulders, shivered, and turned to go indoors.

“No use, William, I am afraid. You’d never find him. But perhaps you would see this er this young lady home ?”

But Mandy shook her head.

“No. Oh, no, thank you! There’s no need to do that I shan’t be a minute,” and she turned and ran back through the hall to the room in which they had left Mrs. Hawkins.

She slipped quickly into the room, shut the door, and leaned with her back against it. The old lady was still sitting at the table, staring straight before her. Under her fingers was the note which Sandy had just delivered, and she did not even look up when Mandy, very breathless and excited, began to speak:

“Please, please Mrs. Hawkins! Will you tell me, please? Will you tell me what has happened? We will help you if you’ll let us.”

“Help me? How can you help me?”

Mandy put her ear to the door behind her, opened it a crack, then closed it quickly again and ran across to the old lady.

“Listen, Mrs. Hawkins. Mr. Trevor is telephoning now, and he won’t be back for a minute. He doesn’t like me, I know, so don’t you take too much notice of what he says about us. Honestly, Mrs. Hawkins, we can help in lots of ways that grown-ups can’t. We’ve done it before and we know. Tell me quickly, please. Is it true that your Belinda has been kidnapped ?”

The old lady, still clutching the scrap of dirty paper

in her shaking fingers, nodded as her eyes filled with tears.

“I’d pay any money if they don’t hurt her. They wouldn’t really do that, would they? They wouldn’t hurt a little girl however much they threaten, would they, my dear ?”’

Mandy’s eyes blazed.

“There’s no need to tell me any more, Mrs. Hawkins. We’ll help you, I promise, and if you don’t tell Mr. Trevor who doesn’t like us and he doesn’t interfere with us, I’ll find young Sandy before the police do. And we’ll find Belinda too! Tell me what she’s like tell me quickly, before Mr. Trevor finishes his telephoning.”

Mrs. Hawkins sat up straight and looked at Mandy steadily, and the girl’s eyes did not flinch under this scrutiny.

“You’re a good girl, my dear,” she said suddenly, “but this is not work for children. There may be dangers for those who interfere with people so bad and heartless that they would kidnap a harmless child for money. Besides, my nephew, Mr. Trevor, has already informed the police, who have been here and are still searching for her there is nothing you can do, and if there were I must not let you.”

Mandy whipped round and faced the old lady, then

leaned forward and put her hands on the wooden arms of the chair.

“I tell you I’ll find that boy more quickly than the police could do. You must have him, so that the girl who gave him the note can be traced. And tell me now what your Belinda is really like ?”’

Mrs. Hawkins looked into the embers of the fire and tried to describe the child who meant so much to her. But it was not a helpful description, for she had not seen her grandchild for a long time, and the only photograph she had was a snapshot taken more than a year ago, which she brought from the mantel-piece to show Mandy. It was a very ordinary picture of a very ordinary little schoolgirl in a tunic and white blouse. The mouth was wide, the nose a little tip-tilted, the eyes well-set, and Mandy guessed that the forehead was freckled. But the most noticeable feature of the subject of the photograph was her fair hair which fell in two plaits on each side of her face.

“May I have the picture, please ? Can you spare it ?”’

“No, my dear. The police took the other, and this is all I have.”

“All right, Mrs. Hawkins. I understand. Now try not to worry so much, for we’ll all be helping you. Good-bye! We’ll give all our news when we can, but just remember that we’re working for you. We’ll find Sandy first,” and then, before the old lady could

answer, she had gone.

The telephone was in a small lobby off the hall, and Mr. Trevor was still using it as Mandy passed him and smiled graciously. He was listening and not speaking, which Mandy thought was a pity, as she would have liked to hear what he had to say; but he did say, “I quite agree, sergeant,” which confirmed her belief that he was speaking to the police.

It seemed rather strange that there was no sign of William as she opened the front-door again and stepped out into the grey light.

The fog caught at her throat and stung her eyes. It closed round her silently and swallowed her up as she reached the bottom step and, with her hand on the iron railings, turned to the left towards home. She wished that she knew what had happened to Sandy. It was so completely stupid of Mr. Trevor to have frightened the boy with talk of the police when he might well be the key to the whole puzzle. Anyway, the thing to do now was to talk it over with the others and get to work as soon as possible. It was lucky that they knew, vaguely, where Sandy lived; because if they could not find Rosemary Lane to-night they could at least start out for it first thing in the morning. ‘They could find Limehouse Church, too much more easily than they could find a girl wearing a scarf with pictures of London on it.

Still keeping her left hand on the clammy iron of

the railings, Mandy turned sharp left at the corner and, after a few more yards, she was home. As she put her foot on the first of the stone steps, a mysterious voice from the ground itself croaked:

“Is that you, miss ? This is Sandy, and I ’opes it is you, miss. This is Sandy. I ’ates that feller with bootlaces on ’is glasses, but I likes you. I come back ’ere to ’elp you if I can, but I couldn’t stand that place no longer.”

“But where are you, Sandy ? It’s me all right, but I can’t see you.”

“Coming up now, miss. I was ’iding under the steps. I reckoned you’d be along soon, and I didn’t like to sort of go into your place by myself like.”

Then, from almost under her feet, Sandy appeared up the narrow steps leading down into the area where the coal was shot into the cellars. He was looking rather more tousled than when she had last seen him, but not nearly so unhappy.

“Come on then, my lad,” Mandy said joyfully. “I was just thinking we’d have to come and find you before the police did. Let’s have a council of war with the others,” and she put her finger on the bell and held it there. “I don’t like that man with the glasses, either, Sandy,” she added.

Tim opened the door. He was looking very flushed.

“Oh, it’s you, is it ? Both of you? We were wondering whether you’d come back for tea. We’ve started.”

“I bet you have,” his sister said as she dashed up the stairs, “Come on, Sandy.”

The sitting-room was warm with colour. A log fire blazed in the hearth and a large standard lamp with an orange shade threw down a cone of light on the group on the rug. Prue and Mark were toasting crumpets, and Guy, with his long legs stretched out towards the flames, was leaning against the sofa.

“Hallo!” he said as he got up. “How did you get

on? And Sandy too, eh? Come on round here and get warm.’

Mandy flung off her cloak, tossed back her hair, .and went over to him.

“Who got these crumpets ?” was all she said.

“I did.” Prue turned a scarlet face from the blaze. “It was my idea, although it isn’t really tea-time yet, and Mark and me braved the fog and everything to get to the baker’s on the corner. I wouldn’t have managed on my own, Mandy.”

“I wanted a lantern that you light and carry on the end of a pole,” Mark said, “or a flaming torch! Pity,

but you hadn’t got either. Buck up and tell us what happened, Mandy.”

They dragged Sandy into the circle round the fire, and while they ate their crumpets and drank more tea, Mandy told them everything that had happened and that there was no doubt that Belinda had been kidnapped. ‘“But why I can’t imagine!” she added.

“I suppose that Mrs. Hawkins is very rich,” Guy said, “and somebody has managed to find out that she’s crazy about this kid. That Mr. Trevor sounds odd.”

“I hate him,” came from Sandy in his corner. “I reckon he is not up to any good. Don’t you reckon so, miss?”

“You’re not to call me ‘miss’, Sandy. Call me by my name. It’s Amanda really, but my friends call me Mandy.”

“0.K. Miss Mandy! But what do you think about Him?”

“I’m not sure, but our first job is to find Linda, I know what she’s like because I’ve seen her photograph, and I can tell you all presently. . . . Now I've promised that we’ll help old Mrs. Hawkins. I’ve told her that we can do lots that grown-ups can’t, and that somehow or other we’ll find young Linda before anyone else does. That’s to be our job. Shall we all stick to it and

give up most of the hols. if necessary? I’m sure young Sandy here will help us, by keeping a look out for the girl who gave him the note. You will help won’t you, Sandy ?”

The boy nodded, and then looked at her with admiration as she kneeled upright and then sat back on her heels.

“You bet I will! It’s just that I don’t like that bloke with bootlaces on his""

“We know, Sandy,” Guy broke in; “we know you don’t like him. I’m all for this, Mandy, but we’ve got to be careful about the police. They’re probably on the job already, and we don’t want to interfere.”

Mandy jumped round to face him.

“But I do want to interfere I’m going to interfere! You haven’t seen Mrs. Hawkins and how upset she is. I want to do something to help her. Something that will beat all these fussy, patronizing grown-ups and the police too. We shan’t be doing anything wrong if we find Linda first, shall we? Are you boys coming in, or have the Jillies got to do it all by themselves again ?”

“What do you mean by ‘again’ ?”” Mark said.

“Sorry! That wasn’t fair, We did it together in Norfolk, and we can do it together again now. Are

you game ?”’

Guy laughed, got up and stretched.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s start. I have an idea that the fog’s clearing. Let’s get young Sandy home first, and he can show us where the girl gave him the note; and then we’ll make a plan.”

Mandy and Prue rushed to the window and threw it open, while Tim dashed downstairs to the front-door. Guy was right, for the fog was clearing fast. Now they could see the shape of the trees on the Embankment and, as they watched, a puff of wind swirled up the river and then suddenly there was a tug hauling three barges and coming down with the tide.

“I like this,” Mark said. “Now we can really see where we are and start exploring. Let’s go.”

Tim tore upstairs to tell the others what they already knew, and then there was a rush for coats and scarves. Prue, the thoughtful, scribbled a note for her father and left it on the table

Don’t worry about us J D The fog has cleared and we are off exploring. Food in the pantry and don’t wait for us.

Sandy was now breathless with excitement. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before, and he was particularly pleased when, because he was still limping

a little, Tim dropped behind the others to keep him company.

They stormed an east-going bus in King's Road and changed to another at Charing Cross. Mark never stopped asking questions, and as all of them, except Guy, answered him at once, the babble was considerable. The bus swung into Fleet Street past Temple Bar, across Ludgate Circus and up to St. Paul's, and then past a desolation of rubble left from the second fire of London, the sight of which silenced even Mark. Past the Mansion House, home of London's Lord Mayor, and the Bank of England, and into the heart of the City, where the narrow streets were like canyons with only a strip of grey sky between the roofs.

When they came to the junction of busy roads at Aldgate, Sandy told them that they would not be long now, and as they looked down on the crowded pavements they realized that they had come, in a very short time, into a different world.

"Where's the river and the docks now?" Guy asked. Sandy jerked his head to the right.

"Dahn that way. This 'ere street we're in is Commercial Road. Wapping is over on the right between the river and 'ere. I lives dahn Rosemary Lane, but I got to show you where she gives me the note and the cash. We'll have to walk back a step."

Commercial Road was wide and dingy, the shops

were small and grubby (although most were making a pathetic attempt to dress-up for Christmas), and the shoppers shabby. Many of the men on the street corners looked like sailors home from the sea, and some were brown and some were yellow, with gold rings in their ears. The traffic in each direction was heavy with big lorries packed with merchandise for the docks.

“What’s this, Sandy ?”’ Prue asked with her nose against the window as they crossed a bridge.

“It’s the canal, but I dunno rightly what they call it. Some chap told me it goes in a tunnel under the houses. Dahn there,” and he gestured again to the right, “there’s a big dock where the canal-boats loads up. I goes there sometimes. It’s grand dahn there. All those rum-looking boats is painted up fine in bright colours. Come on: we gets off here.”

They scrambled off the bus and Mandy tried to look superior when the conductor winked at her. On the opposite side of the wide road a big church its walls and unusual tower had once been white stood serenely in its churchyard surrounded by trees. This was Limehouse Church, and although they did -not know it the tower was a landmark for all sailors who used the great port of London. Sandy took them across the road and showed them the bus-stop where the girl with the scarf had given him the note and the money.

“I dunno where she went,” he complained. ‘“Ow could I? T just ’opped on a bus ’ere and comes up west, like I told your. I don’t know nuffin else abaht ’er.”

“No, Sandy, I don’t see how you could,” Mandy said comfortingly, and then turned to Guy. “What had we better do now ?”

“Go home with him, and explore a bit on the way; and then we can come back to-morrow when it’s light. We haven’t even got a plan yet.”

So Sandy led them back along Commercial Road for a little way, and then turned left into a wide, cobbled street.

“There’s a tunnel ’ere under the river,” he said. “Buses go under to Rotherhithe.”

“Can we go now ?” Mark asked eagerly. “I’d like to do that trip.”

“Can’t get home that way,” Sandy said.

Mandy stopped.

“How far is it, Sandy ? You’re limping badly again. Can’t we get a bus ?”

The boy shook his head. He was looking pale and tired and not at all like the cocky little boy who had faced William and Mr. Trevor only an hour or so

earlier.

“It ain’t far really. Almost next door to Joe’s eating place, it is, dahn Rosemary Lane. I keeps tellin’ your don’t I ? I wants you all to come and see my Mum, cos she’ll be mad at me being so late, and your can explain a bit.”

Guy looked down at the woebegone little face.

“Come on then, my lad. Lead the way and don’t hurry and we’ll make everything all right for you.”

The procession started off again but, truth to tell, Prue was growing rather bored with the expedition. Mandy was busy with Guy and Mark, both of whom seemed to be more interested in these dirty streets than in Prudence; so when Tim dropped behind and said, “I'm getting sick of this, Prue. Too much walking about and talking, and not enough doing something. I like young Sandy, but the others keep with him all the time. I thought we were going to have an adventure. This is just feeble,” she brightened considerably.

This was not the first time that she and Tim had been thrown together just because Mandy pretended to be grown-up.

“Let them get ahead a bit, Tim, and we’ll think of something to do on our own. Don’t lose them, because we don’t know the way; but let’s work together on

this.”

But they did lose them, for it was nearly dark now and the street lamps were few and far between. Tim stopped by two big gates that were just ajar.

“Wonder what’s in there ?” he said, as he poked his head through the gap. Then, “Prue!” he whispered excitedly. “Come here! Look! This must be the dock young Sandy was talking about. There’s big boats in here, and I can see some of those canal-boats too.”

Prue slipped through the gap behind him, and neither of them noticed that the gate-keeper’s hut nearby was empty, for in ten seconds they were out of sight of the gate and on the edge of a great wharf. The dark water before them was full of boats, men were shouting and working on cranes nearby, and big lights had turned the dusk into day.

They slipped back into the shadows as a lorry rumbled past, and then Prue, thrilled now with the adventure, whispered,

“I’m sure we oughtn’t to be here, Tim. If anyone sees us we’ll be arrested or something. What shall we do?”

“I want to see some of those painted boats,” her brother said. “There are two up there, and nobody seems to be about. Let’s go and look.”

They crept forward a few yards, dodged round a pile of packing-cases, stumbled over a railway-line, and then found themselves on the edge of the wharf looking down on a narrow, painted boat called the London Pride.

“It’s just like he said,” Tim remarked ungrammatically. “I’d like to go on and have a look.”

“It’s got pictures of roses and castles on it,” Prue whispered. ‘At least, they look like roses and castles. And see, Tim: it’s got two chimneys, and that cabin must be where they live.”

Suddenly she clutched his arm so fiercely that he cried out with surprise and pain.

“Tim! Look through that little window. There’s a face watching us!”

Tim took a step closer and peered through the gloom.

“It’s a boy in there,” he said. “I wonder if he’d let us come on and have a look round ?”

Before Prue could answer, a harsh voice suddenly broke the silence. They looked up to see a tall, thin man in a peaked cap shaking his fist at them from the deck of the boat.

“Be off with your!” he shouted. ‘“Get out o’ here!

Your trespassing, and I'll have your turned off."

Without a word they turned and ran back behind the packing-cases. When they had got their breath Tim said, "I'm going back, Prue. I suppose it's silly, but I thought that boy in there looked scared. Coming ?"

Prue put out her hand for his, and together they crept back. There was a dim light now behind the tiny window in the cabin of the London Pride and, as they watched, this light moved and came close to the glass.

Then, as if by magic, two words appeared on the window. A message for help surely ?

CHAPTER SIX

Rosemary Lane

Through the fog and murk of the narrow Wapping streets Sandy led Guy, Mark, and Mandy towards his home. It was not until they had left a narrow courtyard for a wider street, lined, on one side, with great warehouses, that Mark turned round and said:

"Better wait here for the others. They're not in sight yet."

Until now none of them had noticed that Prue and Tim were missing; but when they looked back down

the long street, which was now wreathed in fog, Mandy, in particular, felt a stab of fear. She had been talking so hard perhaps it would have been fairer to say, arguing that she had forgotten the two youngsters. She knew their independence only too well, and realized that if they felt neglected or overlooked they would almost certainly go off on their own if it suited them. When she looked round she realized that if Sandy left them now they would be completely lost. It was odd that there were so few people about, and those who did slip by them in the dark seemed strangely alien. She leaned back against a wall and shivered a little as her hands touched the grimy, clammy brick-work. A cat slunk past them into the shadows and then returned and rubbed itself against her legs.

“What’s happened to them?” Mandy said sharply.

“Why didn’t we notice that they weren’t with us? Someone must go back for them.”

“I’ll go back to the end of that courtyard,” Guy said at once. “Wait here for me I won’t be long,” and he slipped off into the mist.

Mark sidled uneasily up to Mandy but said nothing. Sandy fidgeted in the gutter and whistled through his teeth. Soon too soon they heard Guy’s footsteps returning. Long before they could see him they knew that he was alone.

“Sorry,” he said; “I can’t see them. When I got to the top of the court I’d forgotten which way we came. What shall we do ?”

“What shall we do?” Mandy repeated. “They’re lost.”

“They can’t be far away,” Guy said more reassuringly than he felt, “and they know that Sandy lives in Rosemary Lane. If they’ve missed the way they can ask, can’t they ?”

“Ask who?” Mandy interrupted. “There isn’t anybody to ask. This place is dead.”

“Steady, Mandy,” Guy said sharply. “We’ll find them. How far away is Rosemary Lane, Sandy ?”

The boy looked up from the gutter.

“First on the left. We’re nearly there. Honest we are. And don’t you worry, miss. We’ll find these two kids easy enough, but I got to go home first. Soon as I’ve told my mum what’s ’happened I’ll be off again and find them two. I reckon they just stopped to have a look at something, but they’ll find us but I got to go home now.”

There was nothing for it but to follow him, though Mandy felt almost sick with anxiety, as they trudged off again in the gloom. What would J D say when she rang him up from somewhere if there was a

telephone in this ghastly district and confessed that they had lost Prue and Tim in Wapping ? And what might not happen to them, for it was true that Belinda had been kidnapped? Here she comforted herself with the thought that none of the Jillies was worth any money, but that wasn't much help. Sandy crossed the road and as they followed him a slight, human figure slipped silently out of the surrounding darkness into the circle of dim light cast by one of the few street lamps. So quietly and quickly did the man move that Mandy nearly cried out as his sleeve brushed hers and she saw a yellow face with slanting eyes looking down at her.

Guy must have heard her quick intake of breath for he slipped a hand into her arm while, from her other side, Mark whistled and said, "I hope those two kids don't meet that chap. I didn't like him at all. I wish now we'd all gone back to find Prue and Tim. Do you think that's what we ought to have done, Guy?"

Guy wasn't really sure himself, and was feeling a little out of his depth on the first day of his London holiday. Before he could speak, however, Sandy, who was about ten yards ahead under another lamp post, turned and waved to them.

"Buck up," he shouted: "we're home!" and only then did they realize that they had left the wider road and were in Rosemary Lane. It was difficult to imagine why this narrow street was called after the

herb which is said to be “for remembrance”. Surely nobody would want to remember Rosemary Lane? It was narrow and cobbled. The pavement on which they were walking was flanked on their left by a long row of little houses all joined together and looking exactly alike. There were no gardens just a single stone step separated each front door from the pavement. A few yards beyond the lamp, however, there was a glow of light which seemed to come from a shop window. The opposite side of the road was bounded by a high wall.

No. 39 Rosemary Lane, when they reached it, was different from the other houses. It was cleaner and the paint on the door and window-frame seemed, in the light from the lamp, to be a fresh green. The doorstep was different, too, for it was spotlessly white.

Sandy saw Guy looking at this wonderful step and said, “None of you won’t step on that, will you? Mum will be that mad if you does! ’Ere she comes now, and aren’t I going to be for it. Ullo, Mum. ’Ere I am, your see. A bit late but merry and bright as per usual. And I got some pals ’ere I wants your to meet.”

The light from the street lamp shone on Sandy’s mother, Mrs. Burton. Although she was small and trim and tidy, she looked down sternly at her younger son who stood fidgeting on the pavement.

“And where have you been, my boy, and why are you so late ?”

“I’m all right, Mum, but I nearly got hit by a car in the fog and these here pals of mine picked me up and tied up me ankle and took me Home to tea. I want you and Dad to meet them, Mum. They’ve been jolly good to me, Mum.”

Mrs. Burton looked over her son’s head.

“We’ll be having more to say of this later, my lad, but any friends of my boy are friends of ours, and I’ll ask you three to step in and make yourselves at home.”

Sandy bolted past his mother into the tiny hall like a startled rabbit but turned with his hand on the door at the end of the passage.

“There’s two more in this party, Mum, and I got to go and look for them in a sec. They got left behind somewhere and lost. Is Dad in?”

Before anyone could answer the door behind him opened so suddenly that he almost fell into the room.

“So you’ve come home, have you?” said a short, stocky man grimly. Then, “Good gracious, Mother! —what’s all this ?” when he saw the others in the hall.

After that so many things happened that Mandy was never able to remember clearly how they all got into the little kitchen and what happened first. She

did remember being furious with herself for suddenly feeling dizzy, and she remembered too how the trim little Mrs. Burton in her white apron leaned over, pushed her into a chair and poured her out a cup of tea. She remembered Mr. Burton, in his double-breasted blue coat and with a neat grey moustache, standing in front of the gleaming kitchen range and listening while his son, George, tried to tell his story; and she remembered that she interrupted to say, "I'm awfully sorry to be so rude, Mr. Burton, but my brother and sister are lost. We thought they were following us but they weren't. Would you mind very much if I went on with the story and either Guy or Mark went off with Sandy—sorry, it's George, isn't it? We call him Sandy—to see if they can find Prue and Tim ?"

Then she felt dizzy again; but Mark spoke up at once and offered to go with Sandy, while Mr. Burton appealed to his wife:

"Pon my soul, Mother, but I can't make sense of this. I comes back from as hard a day's work as any man could have a'groping up and down the river in a dirty fog, and find me lad has disappeared. Then, almost afore I can finish me first cup o' tea, back comes the boy with a cock-and-bull yarn of an accident, a ten-bob note, a girl with a scarf and a bloke with bootlaces on his glasses. And as if that weren't enough he brings three kids we've never set eyes on and as looks as if they've never been east o' Tower Bridge afore. Not that they aren't welcome if they've done this rascal a

good turn, but now, afore I can get me breath, they wants to be dashing off to find some other kids who are lost. I give up, Mother! You take over, will you ?”

Mrs. Burton took over. She passed her husband another cup of tea and his pipe. She nodded to Mark and George, who slipped out of the room, looked Guy up and down and apparently liked what she saw, and then smiled at Mandy encouragingly.

“Now, my lass,” she said, “it seems there’s a story to tell, and it seems as you’ve all helped my lad in some way. We don’t know who you be nor where you come from but I reckon we’d all get to know each other better if you’d tell us, quick as you can, just how you met George, what’s happened to him, and how you’ve got here.”

Mandy liked her. She was honest and straight-forward and kindly, and it was obvious that however nice and efficient her husband might be, she was the one who managed No. 39 Rosemary Lane. Mandy looked at Guy who was sitting bolt upright next to her on a hard kitchen chair.

“Better tell them everything, Mandy,” he said. “They’ll understand.”

Mr. Burton filled his pipe and glared at them, but when he caught Mandy’s eye he smiled unexpectedly. People did that to Mandy.

“Go ahead, lass,” he said.

Mandy told her story well, although it was difficult to explain how the Standings came into it and exactly why they had all decided to try to find Belinda on their own.

“And I do hope you won’t be too mad with Sandy —George, I mean. I know it’s not my business, and you mustn’t tell him, but he took the money from that girl because he wanted to buy you a Christmas present, Mrs. Burton. He did, really!”

“You do see, sir,” Guy broke in, “that he didn’t know what was in the note. He couldn’t know, and it was only by luck that Amanda found out. If we hadn’t picked young Sandy—sorry, George—up in the fog nobody would have found out about the girl with the scarf. You see, George would have delivered the note and been off as soon as he could.”

Mr. Burton pushed his face through a cloud of tobacco smoke.

“I reckon you’re all crazy,” he said. “Do you mean to tell me serious that our lad has been bribed to deliver a note what is a demand for ransom like you might read in a book or one of them weekly papers?”’

Guy and Mandy nodded in unison.

“And then do you mean to tell me that you kids with our kid reckon you’re going to find this other kid on your own without the police—or—or—well, just by yourselves like ?”

“Yes, we do,” Mandy said brightly. She was beginning to enjoy herself—particularly as she was certain she could hear familiar voices outside.

“Bless us!” Mr. Burton gasped, and retired again behind his smoke screen.

Before his wife could regain control of the situation, the door burst open and there was Sandy, with Mark, Prue, and Tim in the background.

Mandy looked at her brother and sister coldly. Prue was flushed and excited and Tim defiant. Mark and Sandy were grinning, and there was a long silence before Prue stepped forward to Mrs. Burton and held out her hand.

“How do you do ?” she said. “I’m afraid we’re all being a great nuisance and quite filling up your lovely little house. Please forgive us, but we did get lost"

“On purpose,” Tim muttered with a leer in the direction of Mandy and Guy.

“and we’ve had a terrific and most important adventure,” Prue went on, “but we are grateful to you for letting Sandy"

“George,” Mandy murmured. “His name is George.”

“For letting Sandy George come and find us. Oh! you must be Mr. Burton. How do you do ?” and Prue shook hands again.

“I say, sir,” Tim said brightly, “young Sandy says you’re the captain sorry, Master of a tug that pulls the big ships out of the docks and down to the sea. Could I come with you one day, sir? What’s your tug called, sir ?”

Mr. Burton now seemed to be hypnotized.

“Happy Days,” he murmured, with a glance for help to his wife who had never failed him yet.

“I like that name,” Tim continued. “Would you take us a trip some time, sir ? We’d like it very much. A tug is a thing,” here Mr. Burton shuddered Slightly “a thing I’ve never been on.”

“Maybe I would, lad,” he murmured. “Maybe.”

“Shall we tell the others what’s happened to us ?” Prue asked. “What do you think, Tim ?”

Then Mrs. Burton took control.

“I’m going to say what I think and I’ll trouble you

all and that goes for you too, young George to keep quiet while I says it. First, although our boy couldn't very well help it he's done wrong and all of you done wrong too in not telling the police everything that's happened."

"That's right, Mother," the master of the Happy Days broke in. "You're right again, but we can soon fix that. I'll be taking young George round to the Police Station afore he knows where he is."

"And perhaps you'll kindly let me finish what I've got to say, Alfred Burton ?" his wife continued. "If I might be permitted to speak in my own house, that is." Here she paused, but as nobody had the wish nor the temerity to question her rights she went on triumphantly. "It's not for us to tell these youngsters what they've got to do, but I say that they ought to go home now and tell all they know. It's getting late and I reckon the old lady who had the note would be glad to know my boy had told all he knows to the police. And the next thing is that there's too many in this kitchen, and whatever we do there's no reason why we shouldn't slip in to Joe's next door and have have a bite of something together, which won't take ten minutes, and it's right sorry I am I haven't got enough for all in this house. ... And kindly take that grin off your face, young George."

Mandy got up.

"We think you're grand, Mrs. Burton, and thank

you very much for making us so welcome. You needn't worry about us at home, though, because we've only got J.D. and we left him a note to get his own supper. If someone will just show us how to get to the bus presently we'll be all right."

"I tell you what we ought to do, Mandy," Guy said: "maybe you could telephone Mrs. Hawkins from somewhere and tell her we've found Sandy sorry, George—and that he is going to tell the police all he knows about the girl with Linda's scarf."

Mr. Burton nodded approvingly.

"Telephone at Joe's," he said.

"It's a pity to tell these other grown-ups anything really," Mandy said; "but I s'pose that even if we do, we can 'come back here to-morrow and go on working on our own whatever they say. Nobody can stop us spending our holidays in Wapping if we want to, I suppose. What are you grinning at, Mark ?"

Five minutes later they were all in the street and Mr. Burton had solemnly locked the door of No. 39 behind him.

"Joe's" was the shop they had noticed when they had come down Rosemary Lane earlier in the evening. Neither the Jillies nor the Standings had ever seen anything quite like it before, and although Sandy

called to them from the step to “buck up”, they stood fascinated outside the windows which were so steamed that it was hardly possible to see through them. Just inside the glass were four, huge smoking metal trays. In one, pounds of sausages were frizzling, in another was a savoury mass of onions, in another, chip potatoes, and in the last green peas. While they watched entranced, a little bald man with steel eye-glasses on the end of his nose, delved into each tray with a long handled scoop and tipped a portion of each neatly on to a plate.

Tim whistled with admiration. “I didn’t know I was so hungry. Come on, chaps,” and Guy led the way into Joe’s. Outside now, the fog had nearly gone but it was still very cold. Inside, the heat, steam, and smoke were so great that he stopped short to wipe his glasses and the others bumped into him.

The room was long and narrow and crowded with oil-cloth covered tables, most of which were occupied by men and women who stared at the newcomers curiously but not unkindly. A radio blared in one corner, and as all the customers seemed to be speaking at the same time, Joe, who was wielding the long spoon, repeated his orders at the top of his voice. Feeling rather dazed the Jillies sat down at a long table against the wall some distance from the door. Mr. Burton, for whom everybody had a smile or a word of welcome, had already ordered sausages and mugs of tea for all, and while they were waiting Prue told her story of the boy on the narrow-boat called the London Pride, who had

written an urgent message on the window. She was furious when nobody seemed to be interested.

“I tell you all we’ve jolly well got to go back and see that everything is all right. Why don’t you pay some attention, you beasts? I tell you that boy wrote the words ‘Come back’ on the glass and we’ve got to go back.”

“Why didn’t you stay, then?” Guy asked. “Or was that where Sandy found you ?”

“And how did you get there, anyway?” Mandy screamed above the din. “You’ve not told us yet how you got lost. That will be very interesting.”

“It wasn’t where Sandy found us, and how we got there is our business,” Tim explained. “And we didn’t wait because an enormous fat woman came up quietly behind us and, and—"

“Frightened you away,” Guy said. “We understand.” Then he turned to Mandy. “Why don’t you ’phone now while we’re waiting ? I think you ought to tell Mrs. Hawkins.”

“I s’pose I ought. I don’t want to, but I s’pose it would be decent. Where’s the ’phone ?”

Sandy got up and led to the far corner of the room where there was an old-fashioned wall telephone. He stayed with her while she found the number under

the name of the old subscriber at the same address, a name she luckily remembered.

A man's voice answered.

"Is that you, William ? This is Amanda Jillions. I must speak to Mrs. Hawkins, please. It's urgent."

"Have you any news, miss?" came the slow, deliberate voice.

"Yes, William—but hurry, please, and put me through."

"Where are you, miss, might I ask ?"

"Wapping," she said, and laughed aloud when William repeated the name in astonishment. "But hurry, please."

Mrs. Hawkins' voice came, thin and faint, over the wire just as Sandy grabbed her arm violently and pointed towards the door of the café which had just been opened by a girl with a cigarette in her mouth. Then he rushed back to the table shouting to his father as he ran.

"That's 'er. That's the girl wot give me the note. See! She still got the scarf o' London on!"

Then a lot of things happened. First, Mandy dropped the ear-piece in her excitement. Then the girl heard Sandy's accusation, turned, opened the

door and dashed out into the street. Next, Mr. Burton grabbed Sandy and pulled him down to the chair next to him while Guy and Mark jumped up and dashed out after the girl! And all this happened in the silence of surprise after Sandy's shouted warning, and even Joe stood transfixed like a waxwork with his spoon poised over the green peas.

"I'm going too," Mandy said as she reached the table, forgetting all about the dangling telephone.

"No you're not, miss," Mrs. Burton said. "They'll never catch her round here, and they'll be back. Go back and do your telephoning."

Reluctantly Mandy went back to the instrument and was surprised to find that the old lady was still holding on. Mandy told her as little as possible. "But we wanted you to know that we found Sandy as I said we would, which is more than your policemen can do, and we're sure we'll find the girl next. We'll come and see you in the morning and tell you what we've done. Good-bye, Mrs. Hawkins, and don't worry too much."

She went back to the table.

"Do you think they'll catch her, Mr. Burton? If they could, we'd be getting somewhere, wouldn't we ?"

"I bet they get lost," was Tim's comment. "Do

you think it would be a good idea for me to eat Mark's sausages and save them getting cold ?"

Mrs. Burton nodded absently and Tim helped himself. She was looking very worried but smiled when the bell over the shop door jangled and Guy and Mark came in looking very hot and crestfallen.

"Not a hope," the former gasped as he sat down. "She dodged us easily up an alley and into a courtyard place, and we'd never have found our way back if we hadn't asked. I suppose you couldn't help it, but you scared her by shouting out like that, Sandy. If you'd told us quietly we could have followed her."

Mr. Burton got up.

"I've had enough of this," he said decisively. "George and me are off to the police this very minute and you youngsters can come along too, and we'll show you the bus. Come on, all of you."

Nobody argued with the master of the Happy Days when he spoke in this tone of voice—not even Mandy, who got up meekly and followed him to the door. Outside she turned to Mrs. Burton and said "Good night."

"And thank you so much for everything and those lovely sausages especially. We'd like to come

back and see you and George in the morning, if we

may. We shall be down this way exploring, shan't we, boys ?"

And the three boys agreed that they would be down that way!

Mr. Burton did not have much to say as he led them back through alleys and side streets towards the Commercial Road, and neither did Sandy who was not liking the idea of telling his story all over again to a policeman.

Suddenly Prue stopped.

"Please Mr. Burton," she said dramatically, "I'm quite, quite sure that round that next corner are the gates to the dock where we found the narrow-boat with the boy who wrote 'Come Back' on the window. Will you please let us just look in there for a second to see if everything's all right ?"'

"You're right enough, lass. Regent's Canal Dock gates are round the corner. I don't rightly know what mischief you two have been up to in there, but we've got no time for dawdling now."

But Prue could be very stubborn and was already annoyed that nobody had taken any notice of her story of the boy on the London Pride. She could not forget that pale little face glimpsed through a grimy window, and felt sure that something was definitely wrong and wicked about that boat and the man in

the peaked cap and, later, the fat woman who had threatened them. So she argued and pleaded with them all until even Mr. Burton sensed that she was serious and admitted that he knew the gate-keeper and could get them into the dock for a few minutes.

They never knew what he said to the watchman, but they were all allowed in after a muttered conversation.

The big lights on the wharves were out now, and the dock basin was in darkness but for a few lighted portholes and cabin windows. Prue, by the light of her torch, led the way to where the London Pride had been moored about an hour ago.

As the others followed her they all sensed something of her excitement, and Mandy, who knew her better than anyone else, realized that her sister was not acting this time. Prue led them over the railway lines and round the pile of packing-cases and then stopped.

“It was here,” she whispered.

“It still is,” Tim said, “but it’s all dark now. Shine the torch, Prue.”

The thin beam flickered up and picked out the words London Pride on the bows of the boat, which appeared to be deserted. The beam moved to the cabin window which was in darkness, and then along the fifty feet of hull. No sound. No movement from

aboard.

“There’s nobody there now,” Prue said. “But there was.” She lowered her hand as she spoke and the beam was focused on the edge of the wharf. Suddenly she ran forward and the others saw her stoop and pick something from the ground.

“Look!” she shouted. “Oh! look what I’ve found.”

They crowded round her and saw in her left hand one fair plait of hair.
*
Chapter seven.

Belinda On Her Own.

A's soon as the sound of her captor’s footsteps had died away, Belinda sat down at the cabin table and tried to make up her mind what was the best thing to do. She was sure that the two children whom she had seen through the window had seen her message, but when she considered what had happened she could not imagine any real reason why the words “Come Back” traced on dirty glass should suggest to two strangers that she was a kidnapped prisoner.

She soon discovered that she could not get out of the cabin unless the doors were unlocked or forced from the outside. Even if she were able to break the thick glass of the window, the opening was too small for escape; but she did wonder whether to do this so

that she could shout for help. Then she heard footsteps and a thud on the deck as if someone had jumped aboard, and she shivered at the idea that the fat woman might have come back for her. Then she heard her old enemy's voice threatening someone, and when she looked out of the window she saw two small figures disappearing again into the darkness. So her two unknown friends had come back—and in spite of her unhappiness Linda thanked them!

Then the hateful voice came through the closed doors.

"Jest stay there quiet, duckie, and we'll be back soon. Stay there warm and comfy and get yourself a nice hot drink and anything to eat that you fancy. . . . And there's no use yelling, because nobody will 'ear your anyways. Sleep tight, duckie."

Linda did not answer. The footsteps retreated and then the lights on the wharf went out and, but for her own oil lamp, she was in darkness.

She felt better after drinking half a bottle of milk and eating a piece of cake; but she was lonely and frightened by the quiet, which was only broken by the monotonous ticking of a cheap clock hanging over the stove. After a little she lay back on the bunk and slept.

The voice of Joyce outside the cabin door woke her. Linda would never forget those vulgar, cocksure tones!

“I’ve bin keepin’ out of the way fer a bit, Mum. Thought I’d better not come back. You and Dad go into Joe’s, by-the-way ? Oh, your did, did your? An’ wot time was that? An’ you didn’t see me by any chance when you did condescend to go in, I s’pose ? No, Mum! I don’t s’pose your did and I’ll tell your fer why: no sooner did I put me face round the door than a kid with ginger ’air in the corner jumps up and shouts that I’m the girl wot give ’im ten bob to take the note to Chelsea"

“What’s that ? her mother hissed. “Didn’t your take that note yourself after wot ’e told your ?”

Then the two voices died away and Linda guessed that the owners had moved on to the wharf. She stood with her ear close to the doors, and although the two were obviously quarrelling she heard nothing else until Joyce’s voice was raised petulantly “I tell your there was a crowd of posh-lookin’ kids with that brat in Joe’s. ’ow should I know who they were ? I didn’t wait after that kid had yelled out—just as well, as two of those posh boys chased me up the Lane, but I dodged ’em easy enough.”

Linda’s heart banged against her ribs with excitement. Somebody had recognized Joyce and chased her! Could this be the result of her message on the window ? Again she strained to hear the answer, but all she heard was the sound of footsteps running away into the darkness. Then, an inch or so from her head, someone began to fumble with the lock; so she slipped back on

to the bunk and had her eyes closed when the doors were thrown back and the fat woman came in and stood over her.

“Wake up, dearie,” she whispered. “Wake up and get your things together. We’re leaving at once, and we’re in a hurry.”

Linda sat up.

“Are we going to my Granny now?”

The other nodded, but Linda knew she was lying.

“Yes, duckie. We’ll see your Gran soon. Hurry up.”

Anything was better than being a prisoner in this stuffy little cabin, so Linda pretended to believe her and helped to put her things in the suitcase.

“Keep on them dungarees, duckie—easier to walk in they are. ... An’ your cap too. ... Ready? Come on, then, and no nonsense.”

The woman picked up the suitcase and led the way out to the deck. “Put out that lamp, duckie,” she went on, “an’ follow me,” and she turned to see whether the prisoner did as she was told. As she was turning down the wick Linda caught sight of something shining on the floor, and as the lamp flicked out she stooped quickly, picked up her own fair plaits and stuffed them in her pocket. Outside she sniffed the fresh air

appreciatively while the woman locked the doors behind her and then led the way along the wharf. Surreptitiously Linda dropped one of the plaits—it was like a paper chase!

The fog had disappeared at last, and a strong, cold wind from the east had washed the sky clean and sharpened the stars. Linda's hand was held so tightly that it hurt, but she did not care now that she was off the London Pride. At any moment there might be a chance of escape, and she felt certain at last that somebody was trying to find her. She was just thinking how lovely it would be to get away from these horrible people, when the woman stopped suddenly, whipped off the grubby cap, stuffed it across Linda's mouth, and then tied it in place with a big handkerchief.

"Just to keep your quiet while we goes through the gate. The less fuss your makes the sooner you'll see your Gran."

They came to a pair of great double gates soon after, and Linda, almost choking and with tears streaming down her face, heard her companion speak to the watchman and say something about "her lad had face-ache and they would be back in the morning."

The watchman barely looked at her as he let them out, and the woman removed the gag as soon as they were out of sight.

“Sorry about that, kid, but it ’ad to be done. You’ll behave yourself if we meets anyone, won’t your ?”

Linda nodded, but made up her mind that if they did meet anyone she would most certainly shout for help. The streets, however, were deserted now and their only companions were a few thin cats slinking from doorstep to gutter in the shadows. They hurried on through dark alleys and badly-paved courtyards. Once they crossed a bridge under which the black water of a dock lay still and deep in the moonlight, and still the woman gripped her hand and dragged her forward in silence.

Linda’s legs were aching when they paused at the end of a narrow street. The outline against the starlit sky of the buildings on her left looked different, and it was a moment or two before she realized that nearly all these houses were in ruins. She was old enough to remember dimly the horror of one air-raid, years ago during the war, but did not fully realize that London was still the most badly scarred of all cities.

A cold wind came whispering out of the east and sent some dirty scraps of paper scurrying before them. The moon came out from behind a cloud and threw grotesque, gaunt shadows of the ruins across the street, and then the woman dragged at her hand again and led her forward. She counted as she walked, and at fourteen, about half-way down the street, stopped before an old house that was not so severely damaged as its neighbours. Windows, long empty of glass, were

boarded over and two planks were nailed across the front door. From overhead came a weird sighing and creaking, and when Linda looked up she saw a board, on which was painted a picture and some words, swinging gently in the wind. This deserted building, then, must be an old inn.

The woman urged Linda forward and suddenly pulled her round the corner of the house into a dark, narrow alley at the end of which was the gleam of water. Linda knew now that they had reached the river, and then they stopped in front of another door; but she never knew how they got into the house. Inside the air smelled stale and damp and the bare floor boards shifted horridly under her feet as they walked up a long passage to a room at the back.

The woman put down the suitcase, closed the door and lit a match. She did not even glance at the child as she brought three candles from her pocket, lit them, and put them on a rickety table set against a window which stretched the full width of the room. There was no other furniture. As the wavering flames of the candles strengthened, Linda saw that the room was very large and that, a few feet from the window, near to where she was standing, was a square trap-door in the floor.

“What are you going to do to me ?” she whispered with chattering teeth.

The woman turned from the window and there was

a kinder note in her voice when she spoke.

“Don’t worry, dearie. Nobody’s going to hurt yer:
I promise you that. Do as yer told and nobody will hurt yer. Just a little trip on the water that’s all!”

Linda believed her. She supposed that she was being moved to a new prison because her rescuers were on her trail at last. But a trip on the river ?

As she crossed the bare room to the window the floor rang hollow under her feet and she realized that the room was built actually above the water and that the strange, whispering gurgle which she could hear was the swirl of the tide round the piers supporting this part of the house. When she looked from the window the river was rushing past below her, and she thought she could distinguish a darker blur on the water which might be a small boat. The woman must have seen this, too, for she moved softly over to the trap-door and a minute or so later Linda heard strange sounds under her feet and then three sudden knocks on the floor.

:“Stand back, dearie,” the woman said suddenly.

“Keep out of the way. ’Ere’s the Queen Elizabeth come for yer.”
She pulled strongly on the iron ring of the trap-door, which creaked and groaned and then lifted upwards. A cold, dank smell of water and mud surged into the room and a voice which she recognized and hated

whispered, “Got the kid there? Let ’er dahn quick then, fer the ebb’s running strong.”

First the woman lowered Linda’s suitcase and then, before she could even protest, lifted her, swung her over the hole above the water and lowered her into the waiting arms of the master of the London Pride who was standing below in a rocking dinghy.

“Get dahn there and stay still, kid,” was all he said as the trap-door above them closed and he took up his oars. Skilfully he guided the little boat between the piers out into the main stream. Linda looked back and saw the three lighted candles still in the window for a second before they were extinguished. Above her the sky was clear and bright and there was enough light from the moon to show her tall buildings and cranes on the opposite bank. They were moving fast downstream and ahead of them, in the middle of the stream, was a long black shadow. It was not a boat for it was too low and long and, as they drew nearer, Linda could see something which looked like a little hut built on it. Then she saw that the strange shape was three barges moored together to make a big raft which must be firmly anchored to buoys or to the river bed. Without being told, Linda realized suddenly that the little hut was to be her new prison; and indeed, before she could speak, the dinghy was skilfully brought alongside and moored to an iron ring.

The man tossed her suitcase on to the deck of the strange raft, jumped up himself, and then held out a

dirty hand to Linda, who shuddered as she grasped it. Next he took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door of the hut, which proved to be more substantial than it had looked from the water.

Linda was not so frightened now. She had guessed that this was going to happen, she was sure that help was nearer than it had been, and suddenly she was convinced that the man in the shiny-peaked cap was very nervous. He did not speak when motioning her into the hut, and his hands were shaking when he struck a match and put the flame to the wick of a hurricane lamp hanging from the ceiling. Then he fixed an old sack over the small window, sat on a box near the door, and lit a cigarette.

Linda looked round and saw that this was a better prison than the other. The little room was clean. There was a chair, an oil-stove and a bunk with blankets, and in the far corner a table covered with oil-cloth on

which was a tea-pot, milk bottle, loaf, packet of margarine, tin of sardines and, rather surprisingly, a box of dates.

The man followed her glance and said, “Relax, kid. Nobody’s agoin’ to touch yer. We’re just goin’ to stay ’ere fer a bit and then I’ll be taking yer off to see yer Gran. ’Elp yerself to anythink yer want. No need to be scared o’ me.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Linda said clearly. “My

teeth keep chattering ’cos I'm cold; but I'm not scared of you. You’re just a bully and you’re afraid yourself. I know you’re afraid. T can see you are, and I hope I’ll see you more afraid before long. I’m going to go to sleep now, and I'd like you to get outside.”

The man glared at her but said nothing.

“I mean it,” Linda said steadily. “Get out.”

She never really knew how she found the courage to speak to the bully like this; but the man shambled to his feet, took the lantern from its hook and went out, closing and relocking the door behind him.

As soon as he had gone, Linda kneeled on the bunk and took down the sack from the window. It was very dark inside the room now, but she groped for the box of dates and munched them as she looked through the glass. She could see part of the deck and occasionally caught a glimpse of her captor, who was fidgeting about and smoking.

She dozed a little but was too cold to stay in one position for long; and soon the sky lightened and she knew that the night was nearly over. As soon as she could see, she lit the oil-stove with matches she found on the table and made herself some tea. She was just pouring her first mug when she heard footsteps outside. She stood still with the teapot poised, listening. The person outside was listening, too, she was sure. Her hand ached and her heart thumped with the strain,

but she held her breath and stood stock still. Would he unlock the door and see if she were asleep ? He did not. After a long minute she heard him move and then, apparently satisfied that she was asleep, he moved away. With a sigh of relief, Linda put down the teapot and ran over to the window. It was just light enough now for her to see the man cross to where the dinghy was moored, jump in, and cast off.

Now was her chance! First she drank some tea and cut herself a slice of bread. Then she tried the door which, as she expected, was still locked. It was a heavy door, too, and she did not think that she was strong enough to break it down. Next she turned to the window and considered its size. It didn't look very big, but she suddenly decided to try to squeeze through. The glass broke easily with a blow from the leg of the chair, and then, with the bread knife, she knocked off all the jagged edges which remained. It needed some courage to put her head through the gap and then go on after she had seen how far she had to fall to the deck. She got one arm through first and then pushed off from the bunk on which she had been standing and let herself go. Fortunately her fall was checked by her coat, which she was wearing over the dungarees and which bunched up as she wriggled forward. The fall was not deep, but she landed clumsily and jarred her left arm so badly that the tears started from her eyes as she sat up feeling sick and dizzy. For a moment the barges, the buildings on the river bank, and even the pink-tinted sky to the east, swung round in a great circle. She clenched her teeth, rubbed her

elbow and wriggled the numbed fingers into life again, and then got to her feet. She was free of her prison, but how was she to get to land before the man with the shiny-peaked cap came back for surely he intended to return for her?

As a new day began, the seagulls sailed and mewed round the moored barges and a fresh wind blew up the river, ruffling her hair and somehow giving her new hope. Perhaps if she waited long enough someone would come and rescue her? Perhaps some brown-faced sailors with gold rings in their ears would row across the swirling tide and take her away from the horrors of the last twenty-four hours? Or perhaps a great, white, gleaming ship would come gliding round that bend in the river and the captain on the bridge would see her standing there forlorn, and signal-bells would ring in the engine-room and the great ship would stop and a little boat would be lowered and she would be rescued and taken aboard.

But no great ship came up the river and no brown-faced sailors hailed her. Only the seagulls circled and called above the muddy tide as she laughed to herself and began to explore her floating prison.

A dinghy was made fast on the other side. It was swaying gently against the barge and looked invitingly safe. Two short oars lay at the bottom of the little boat, which was certainly not the same as that in which the master of the London Pride had brought her in the middle of the night, and in which he had just rowed off.

He must have overlooked this other boat, or not thought it possible for Linda to get out of the hut.

She did not hesitate now, for this was her great chance. It was difficult to loosen the knot in the stiff rope, but she managed it at last. As the little boat felt the force of the tide, she swung free of the barges and began to move quickly down the stream. Linda struggled, without success, with the oars which were too heavy and awkward for her to manage. Suddenly she was afraid as the boat twisted and rocked uncontrollably in the current. Without the oars she was helpless and could only crouch in the bows, praying that the tide would bring her into the shore. Soon, at a bend in the river, she saw that with good fortune she might be carried near enough to a spit of slimy mud now showing at the foot of some stone steps a hundred yards away. With all her might she willed and prayed that her little boat would bring her in near enough to wade ashore. And so it did. Slowly now, as it moved out of the full force of the current, it came in closer to the welcome land, and when Linda jumped into the water she had only a few yards to wade.

The mud was thick and smelly and reached nearly to her knees, but she cared nothing for that. She was free and on land again, and the hateful family of the London Pride would never catch her now. She squelched through the mud to the steps and scrambled up to safety. Then she was in a narrow street, flanked by great warehouses, and while she was wondering what

to do next she saw a red telephone box.

Now she could speak to her Granny and ask her to come and find her. There were pennies in her coat pocket and she remembered how her father had joked with her and told her how she could remember Mrs. Hawkins' telephone number. "Think of a blue flower for a man's buttonhole," he had said, "and then the battle of Waterloo."

She was in the box in a flash, had pressed two pennies in the slot and dialled Flaxman 1815. With thudding heart and dry tongue she heard the "Brrr-Brrr," of the ringing tone. After a long time a man's voice answered.

"This is Flaxman 1815."

Linda pressed Button A.

"I want my Granny, Mrs. Hawkins. I'm Belinda Ferguson."

"Say that again," the voice said. "Say it carefully. Are you really Belinda ?"

"Yes, of course I am. Who are you and where is my Granny? Please come and find me whoever you are, 'cos I'm tired and dirty and lost and I've been a prisoner all this time."

"All right. Steady, Belinda. Don't worry any more.

We’ll come right away. Where are you ?”

“In a telephone box.”

“What street and where ?”

“I don’t know.”

“Leave the telephone receiver on one side. Don’t put it back and cut us off. Go out of the box and run to the corner of the street and see its name. Come back as quickly as you can and tell me. I'll be waiting. Hurry!”

Linda’s eyes were sparkling with excitement as she did as she was told. Now, at last, she was safe!

The end of the street where another crossed it was only about one hundred yards away. She trotted up happily with mud still squelching from her filthy shoes. As she turned to look up for the street name-plate on the corner, she did not see a familiar figure coming towards her from the opposite direction a figure which broke into a run as soon as she saw Linda and then grabbed her arm fiercely.

“So here you are, my beautiful boy,” Joyce snapped. “Right into my arms.”

With a cry of terror Linda wrenched herself free and raced down the side street with the elder girl in pursuit. Fear and a bitter disappointment gave her

fresh strength, but as she turned a sharp corner her heart sank. There was no way out of the street: it led nowhere but to a great warehouse with blank, staring windows.

If she turned and faced Joyce she knew that she would have no chance; so, with tears streaming down her face and her feet like lead, she ran into the yard with the great warehouse before her. Then she saw that it was partly ruined, but that a staircase, which looked safe enough, led to the upper floors.

Without even looking back she started to clamber up to the unknown.

Chapter eight.

The Second Plat.

Not very long after Belinda had run despairingly up the stairs of the half-ruined warehouse in Wapping, the Jillies and the Standings were getting ready for breakfast in their Chelsea flat by the same river not many miles away.

The fog of yesterday had gone and the sun was shining round Mandy's head like a halo as she kneeled on the window seat talking to Guy about yesterday's adventure. Mark was helping Prue make toast in the kitchen, and Tim was already at the table helping himself to cereal before the others realized how hungry he was.

“I’m sorry, Mandy,” Guy was saying, “but I think this is too serious for us to deal with on our own. Old Burton has been to the police by now with Sandy, and Mrs. Hawkins, whatever she may have said to you, is in touch with them too, and if we’re not careful we may be working against young Belinda instead of for her.”

Mandy turned her back.

“I might have known that’s the sort of line you would take. I’m not trying to prevent anyone doing anything to find Belinda. T want us to help, but to do it in our own way, just to prove that we can. ... You haven’t seen that Mr. Trevor, Guy! If you had, you’d want to work on our own. He just patronized me and I’m not going to put up with that.”

“Maybe you’re right, Mandy, and you know we’ll back you up; but I still think we ought to tell your father.”

“Oh! J.D.?” Mandy began, and then was interrupted by the gentleman himself as he sauntered into the room.

“What’s all this you’re going to tell me? Good morning, Guy. Good morning, daughters. A nice morning. Looks too good for the studio I think maybe I’ll take a little holiday.”

Nobody answered his first question, so he repeated

it as they all sat down together.

“What are you going to tell me? You needn’t all look so guilty. I know you’ve got something on, and I know you were all out far too late last night. Have you heard any more about that missing child, Amanda? They ought to have some news by now.”

Mandy looked a little unhappy at this direct question. She did not like keeping anything from her father whatever she might say about grown-ups, but it was not often that he seemed to want to know what they were doing. He was a most unexpected type of father! Sometimes a guilty conscience would lead one of them into a confession of something outrageous or stupid and he would scarcely look up from his paper or easel. At other times if they had been to a theatre or a concert, or read a good book, he would stop whatever he was doing and talk to them about it for an hour. They usually discovered, too, that he knew far more about their various adventures than seemed possible, and in this respect he often made them look rather foolish.

As silence now followed his last question he looked blandly round the table, winked as he caught Guy’s eye, and said, “If you haven’t heard anything I think you ought to go round after breakfast, Amanda, and ask the old lady. This must all be very distressing for her.”

Suddenly Mandy made up her mind. It was ridiculous to keep J.D. out of this, even if Guy had said it

was, and even as she began to pour out the story of yesterday she realized that it was rather a relief to share the responsibility with the nicest of all men. After all, this was what a father was for!

They were still talking after they had finished eating, and twice Prue ran to the kitchen for more hot coffee. They were still interrupting each other when the clock struck nine and the dirty plates had been pushed to the end of the table and the air was blue with J.D.'s cigarette smoke.

"And so you see, darling," Prue explained, "we're quite sure Belinda must have been on that narrow-boat, because I found a fair plait on the wharf, although we can't think how she can have got there. I thought in the night that we only imagined she was a boy when we saw her through the window 'cos her hair had been cut off. I wish I'd got the plait to show you, but Mr. Burton took it to show the police station."

J.D. nodded and looked round seriously as he stubbed out his cigarette-end.

"Glad you told me," he said quietly. "You were quite right, Guy—this is too big even for the family, and I'm sorry if it upsets your arrangements but you must tell the police all you know, and I'll come and help you. As long as you keep nothing back from them and don't interfere, I suppose you can do what you like to find this child. You come with me, Amanda,

and we'll go and see Mrs. Hawkins first. Then, if there's no news, and you all have no objection, I will accompany you to the salubrious district of Wapping, possibly reporting to the police when we get there. How will that suit you all ?"

Prue ran round the table and flung her arms round his neck. "And you won't go to the studio at all? You'll help us to follow the trail of the plait and find Belinda before the man that Mandy and Sandy hate ?"

J.D. got up and stretched. "I know very little of my daughters' likes and dislikes. I can't keep pace with them, but I see no reason why we shouldn't do a little detective work together. As a family we're rather good at it, aren't we ?"'

Ten minutes later he was standing with his elder daughter outside Mrs. Hawkins' front door which was opened by a strange woman in black who smiled at them pleasantly.

"I must apologize for a call at this very early and inconvenient hour," J.D. began, "but will you please inform Mrs. Hawkins that Mr. Jillions and his daughter Amanda wish to see her very urgently ? The matter is personal and private," he added firmly.

After a wait of some minutes in the depressing hall, they were shown into the little room at the far end where Mrs. Hawkins was seated by the fire. Her eyes were bright and her thin cheeks flushed with excitement.

Mr. Trevor, with festooned eyeglasses, straddled the hearth-rug. Mandy gave the old lady a brilliant smile but ignored Mr. Trevor, who looked down his long nose at her.

Nobody could be stiff with Mr. Jillions for long, for when he took the trouble he could be particularly charming. His children took after him!

He introduced himself by explaining that he had, only a few minutes ago, heard what his children and their guests had discovered in Wapping yesterday. Then he turned to Mr. Trevor.

“My daughter tells me that you, sir, are handling this most distressing occurrence for Mrs. Hawkins and are in constant touch with the police. It seems that, by mere chance, my young people have discovered something which may help. I suggest that we pool our information and see the police as soon as possible.”

Mrs. Hawkins opened her mouth to speak but Mr. Trevor held up his hand.

“I hardly think that will be necessary,” he said coldly. “The situation is under control Mr. er, Jillions, and a number of amateur detectives will help neither the child nor those who are genuinely concerned with her welfare.”

Mr. Jillions flushed. He had not come here to be insulted, and now began to understand his daughter’s

dislike of Mr. Trevor. Mandy came round from behind Mrs. Hawkins' chair and knelt on the floor beside her.

"You know now that we want to help you, don't you, Mrs. Hawkins? I telephoned you last night, you remember. Have you had news ?"

The old lady looked at her nephew defiantly and then for a moment rested her hand on Mandy's head.

"I shall tell them, Trevor," she said. "They have a right to know, and it is kind of Mr. Jillions to offer to help us. ... Earlier this morning my nephew here answered the telephone and my Linda spoke to him——"'

"Linda ?" Mandy shouted. "Are you sure ?"

"Yes. He is sure. ... She said she had been a prisoner but did not know where she was and would we come quickly and find her"

"What are we waiting for then?" Mandy shouted as she jumped to her feet.

"Only one thing," Mr. Trevor said. "We do not know where she is. I told her to leave the telephone receiver off, run to the corner and come back and tell me the name of the street. She went but did not return."

"An interesting but disturbing situation," J.D. remarked calmly, but when Mandy looked at him she

knew that he was tremendously excited. “If you would not consider it an impertinence, may I ask what you did next ?”

Mr. Trevor opened his mouth and was about to say that he did consider it to be an impertinence, when once again his aunt interrupted him.

“My nephew acted with the greatest promptness and notified the police so that the call may be traced.”

“Has it been ?” J.D. asked.

“Not yet so far as we know. We are waiting to hear.”

“But surely,” J.D. persisted, “surely they must have found out by now ?”

Mr. Trevor looked uncomfortable, as if this was a criticism of his own efficiency, and after a little persuasion from Mrs. Hawkins, he left the room to telephone the police again.

“You must excuse him,” the old lady said to Mr. Jillions, “if he does not seem to want any help. He is anxious to show me how very efficient he is. I have telephoned for Belinda’s father who will be here later to-day. . . . Now perhaps you will tell me what you have discovered, my dear ?” she said turning to Mandy, but before the girl could answer Mr. Trevor came back, looking particularly pleased with himself.

“The news has just come through,” he said. “The telephone box was somewhere in the dock area probably Wapping and the Limehouse police are following up this most important clue.”

“Let’s go down there at once, then,” Mandy said; and then, as Mr. Trevor turned with his usual supercilious sneer, “We don’t have to go with you, Mr. Trevor, if you don’t want us! There’s nothing to stop us going where we like.”

“Be quiet, Amanda,” J.D. said sharply, and then added something quietly to Mr. Trevor. After a moment the two men apologized to Mrs. Hawkins and went out of the room.

“Oh dear,” Mandy said as the door closed. “I'm afraid I was rather rude. Why doesn’t he like me, Mrs. Hawkins? We do so want to help you all, and Mr. Trevor keeps making me think that he doesn’t really want Belinda found at all.”

Mrs. Hawkins looked at her sharply and then laughed nervously.

“Nonsense, my dear! You mustn’t say such things. We all want to find Belinda and I feel sure we shall do so to-day. I want her back before her father comes.” She turned away and then, as if to herself, went on, “We must find her, if only to make amends to him. I have behaved very badly to him.”

Although she had not said much about it, Mandy had wondered why Belinda's father had not come to London and why everything was being handled by Mr. Trevor. The answer seemed to be that there had been a quarrel between Mrs. Hawkins and her son-in-law in the past; but as this was nothing to do with her she smiled at the old lady as if she understood, and said nothing.

A few minutes later the two men came back. J.D. was smiling, and even Mr. Trevor looked a little more human as he said, "We have reached a decision. Mr. Jillions has persuaded me that we should perhaps all work together in assisting the police. I have been telephoning the latter again, and we are all going down to Limehouse immediately."

"All?" Mandy said breathlessly, "All of us?"

Her father, behind Mr. Trevor, nodded slightly and winked, and after that everything was very exciting.

They said a hurried "Good-bye" to Mrs. Hawkins and, on the doorstep, Mr. Trevor said, "I will be round with the car in ten minutes," and was as good as his word.

Back in the flat, Guy, Mark, Prue and Tim were hustled and bullied until they were running in all directions for coats and scarves.

“Never mind about anything,” Mandy pleaded. “Never mind about washing-up or making the beds but come on as quickly as you can. J.D. has won a marvellous victory over that man Trevor somehow, but I still wish we were doing this on our own.”

“Never mind, Mandy,” Guy said rather unexpectedly as he came into the room pulling a thick blue sweater over his head; “once we get down there I suppose we can drift off and find young Sandy again, can’t we, and leave the others behind ?”

And that is what they did.

Mr. Trevor’s car was large, shining and very expensive. Tim, thrilled and silent with envy, sat between the driver and his father on the front seat with Mandy, Prue, Mark, and Guy in the back. It was not very long . before they drew up outside Limehouse Police Station.

“We look rather like a circus,” Guy said as they all trooped in. “I think we’re causing some amusement!”

The policemen and detectives they met were friendly enough, but they grew very tired of waiting about for J.D. and Mr. Trevor, who were whisked away, as soon as they arrived, into what Tim imagined must be a “Secret Chamber”. Once Mr. Jillions came out with a welcoming smile and said, “Patience, my children. I hope we’ll be released soon.”

“Doesn’t any policeman want to interview me ?”

Prue asked plaintively.

“I think I’d like to be done, too,” Tim added. “Anything is better than hanging about like this.”

“You’ve got some news, J.D.,” was all that Mandy said: “Out with it! I can see it in your eye.”

He beckoned them and they all left the bench on which they had been sitting and crowded round him.

“You’re right, Mandy. I’ve got news. The call-box from which the child called Mr. Trevor is in Rosemary Lane. Wait here for me. I don’t expect we’ll be much longer, and then we’ll see what the Jillies can do. I don’t think they’ll want to question you separately.”

As soon as he had disappeared Mandy jumped up.

“Come on, chaps. Rosemary Lane for us. I expect J.D. will guess where we’ve gone.”

“But aren’t you going to wait" Mark began, and then stopped when he saw the wicked glint in Mandy’s eye. And when he saw the meek way in which his elder brother Guy got up and followed her he laughed outright.

Tim, on the way out, crossed the room to speak to a large policeman sitting at a desk in the corner. Very solemnly he said, “We are going out to buy some buns.”

He need not have bothered. The policeman did not even look up.

Rosemary Lane looked better on a bright morning, but no weather conditions could make it attractive. “Joe’s”, as they hurried by, looked squalid, but the doorstep and brass of Number 39 still gleamed brightly.

Sandy answered the door and grinned broadly when he recognized his visitors.

“Dad’s at work and Mum’s out shopping, but I’ll get I don’t know if I lets you in and you treads all over the clean ’all! Come on out ’cos I've got some news for you all.”

Guy said, “Where do we go, round here, when we want to talk ?”

“Down to the Stairs,” Sandy answered, and when they all looked at him blankly, he repeated, “The Stairs! Down by the river.” |

Sandy seemed a little embarrassed as he led the way down Rosemary Lane which was now quite busy. Huge lorries laden with packing-cases rumbled up and down the street, women with tired faces hurried along the narrow pavements without a second glance at the sailors and dockers lounging in doorways. Sometimes they met friends of Sandy’s, whose astonishment at the sight of the Jillies was very obvious. Many

laughing comments followed their progress as Mandy, with flaming cheeks and head held high, stalked along with Guy by her side.

They had hardly started, however, before Sandy told them of his visit the previous evening to the Police Station with his father. “I suppose you showed them the plait I found ?” Prue said. “I wish I’d come with you, Sandy. Matter of fact, that was one reason why I would have liked to stay at that Police Station this morning. Yes, we’ve been there this morning. Just wait a sec. and we’ll tell you our story—where was I ? Oh, yes. I'd have liked to be questioned by the police. It must be fun.”

“It wasn’t fun!” Sandy went on. ‘““‘But they were all right really I suppose. They give me a bit o’ cake. Stale it was, but it was cake, and they kept that bit o’ hair you found. Anyways we all went back to the dock some coppers come with us in a big car but there was nobody on them two narrow-boats. We bin again this morning afore breakfast, but there’s still nobody there. All locked up an’ empty. The coppers stayed but sent me an’ Dad off home. I reckoned you’d be coming, so I waited for you. I never lets down me pals. What was you doing at the Police Station anyways ?”

“You’d know that girl that came into Joe’s again, wouldn’t you, Sandy ?” Guy said. “Even if you saw her without her scarf?”

“I would. I told the coppers about her. I reckon I’d know her.”

“We’ve got to find her,” Guy went on. “I think if we find her we shall find Belinda. She’s our link. Look for her everywhere, Sandy. We rely on you because we don’t know where we are from one minute to the next down here, but this is your country. Shall we split up into three parties? Sandy with one, Mark with another, and me the other. We three know her you see, although Mark and me might make a mistake because we only chased her in the fog. It’s a mistake for us all to trail round together like this. Everybody is staring at us now as if we were mad.”

“You flatter yourself, Guy,” Mandy said as she tossed her head, “but I do agree we’re a bit conspicuous. Where are these stairs of yours, young Sandy ? They lead down to the river, I suppose ?” Then, before he could answer, she shouted, “Look, Guy: I bet that’s the one. It’s the only one we’ve passed, anyway. Let’s have a look inside.”

Before anyone could speak she dashed across the road in front of a lorry and dived into an empty telephone call-box. There was nothing to see there, of course, but they were able to tell Sandy that only a few hours ago the missing Belinda had actually telephoned from this box and told her Granny that she had escaped. He was duly impressed.

“That’s rum!” he said. “Wonder how she got ’ere

from those narrow-boats ?”

“That’s what we want to know,” Guy said, “She didn’t know where she was, and Mr. Trevor, who answered the ’phone, told her to go out and find the name of the street. If anyone asked you that, Sandy, which way would you go?”

“Don’t be silly, mate,” Sandy said cheekily. “I knows what street I’m in don’t I ?” Then, hastily as he saw Guy’s expression, “alright! alright! Arfa mo’.”

He stood still for a moment and wrinkled his freckled forehead. Then he jerked a thumb behind them. “Back there, where we come, there’s a narrow street crosses the Lane. Maybe there’s a notice up there on the wall or just down ’ere by the Stairs there could be another. Let’s look.”

He led them on a little way until they came to the entrance to a narrow passage between two warehouses. He pointed to a notice on the wall which read “Rosemary Lane”, and to another on the opposite wall which announced “Drake’s Stairs”.

“I see,” Guy said. “She’d have found the name of the street which ever way she had run from the call-box. .. . I wonder why she didn’t come back, and I wonder where she came from ? Does this passage lead down to the river, Sandy ?”

The boy nodded and Prue, after looking behind her,

said suddenly, “Let’s look at the river. I don't like this end of Rosemary Lane. I keep feeling that somebody is following us.”

The others, except Mandy, looked at her in surprise but went after her down the dark passage which, as soon as it had run the depth of the warehouses, broadened at the head of a long flight of stone stairs leading down to the river.

The tide was on the turn, but between the last step and the water was a stretch of brown mud. A keen, wind came up from the sea and the gulls sailed and turned serenely above the swirling tide. A hundred yards or so upstream some barges were moored and some gulls seemed to be fighting above the decks and the roof of a little hut that was built upon them.

Mark was about to ask why a permanent raft of this type was in midstream when Mandy said:

“There’s a little boat coming out from under a house up there. Look.”

They followed her pointing finger to where on their bank, a little above the moored barges, some half-ruined houses seemed to be built right over the river. Just at this point a channel of water from some sewer or drain ran out to join the main stream, and along this channel crept a little dinghy. The man rowing seemed to be having a lot of difficulty and it was not surprising that Sandy said disgustedly, “Silly old chump! ’E

don’t belong to the river. He will get stuck in a minute.”

To their surprise and disappointment, the boat managed to reach the main stream, and then Mandy, who had the keenest eyes and was looking very puzzled, said:

“I know it sounds absolutely crazy, but that man in the boat reminds me of somebody I’ve seen recently and I can’t think who it is. It’s maddening, but I just can’t place him.”

Prue sympathized. “I know that feeling, Mandy. I often have it. Sometimes I meet people and know I’ve met them before when I haven’t, if you know what I mean.”

“Perfectly!” Guy said. “Not everybody would understand you, baby, but I do.”

Prue put out her tongue at him.

“Anyway,” she went on, “that man in the boat doesn’t remind me of anybody. I don’t know anybody who wears a cloth cap like that. What shall we do next ?”

“Have a look at that dinghy stranded on the mud down there,” said Guy, who had been looking downstream. “I don’t know much about boats on the river here, although we can sail them in Norfolk, but I

guess that nobody who works on the river would leave a boat stranded like that. It's not even moored to anything. What do you think, Sandy ?"

"Yer right there, chum. I never noticed it afore. Let's go and look."

"There's another thing," Mark broke in excitedly: "there's one set of footsteps in the mud coming from the dinghy to these steps. Come on, chaps!"

The boys jumped off the last step and squelched through the mud towards the deserted dinghy. Mandy watched them with a little puzzled frown. She was still thinking of something else. Who did that man in the boat remind her of ?

"I wonder if J.D. has missed us yet?" Prue said. "He won't worry, anyway. He'll know that we can look after ourselves."

Her sister made no answer. She was still watching the boys splashing through the mud towards the abandoned dinghy while thinking about something else.

Prue tried again.

"Mandy darling, I've got one of my feelings. I think something terrific is going to happen to us."

She said this a little for effect, for she could not know how right she was.

The boys had reached the boat and Mandy saw Guy jump in, stoop down and then stand erect with something in his hand.

“Hi,” he yelled triumphantly. ‘“Can you hear me, Mandy? The kid has been in this boat. Here’s her other plait.”

Prue caught her breath with excitement.

“What did I tell you ?” she began, and then her sister clutched her arm, turned towards the moored barges and said, “Got it, Prue! I’ve remembered. There he is just tying his boat to those barges, and it’s absolutely crazy now that I have remembered. He reminds me of the Bishop. You know, Prue. Mrs. Hawkins’ dear old William!”
*

Chapter Nine.
The Bishop Again.

PRUE was trying to look two ways at the same time. Thirty yards away on her left the boys were triumphantly floundering back towards them through the mud, while Mandy was dragging her arm and pointing to the moored barges where a man in a cloth cap was" laboriously and awkwardly climbing on to the decks.

“Mandy!” she said excitedly. “Don’t you understand ? Guy has found the other plait. Linda must have been on that boat! Mandy! She wouldn’t be

drowned, would she,? And that little boat just washed up on the shore without her? That couldn't happen could it, Mandy ?"

Her sister turned and smiled at her gently.

"No, Prue. I'm sure that hasn't happened. If she really was in that boat when it stuck on the mud, I think she came here and escaped up these steps. Can't you see her footsteps in the mud, Prue? There they are. Mark showed them first just now! Don't worry, Prue. She escaped in that little boat from somewhere, came up these steps into Rosemary Lane and found the telephone box, and I wish we knew what happened to her next....Here are the boys now, making enough noise to scare the whole of Wapping. I expect they've settled everything!"

Guy arrived first. His shoes, socks, and the ends of his trousers were dripping with mud and he grinned as he tossed Linda's pathetic plait into Mandy's lap as she sat on the bottom step of Drake's Stairs, still looking up the river to the moored barges in midstream.

"What d'you think of that ?" he said as he sat down beside her. "She was in that boat all right, and I should think she was alone because there's only one set of footsteps coming away from it. We're one ahead of the police now, I should think."

Mandy edged away a little.

“I’m sorry, Guy,” she said, “I hate to mention it, but you smell of mud. . .. But I'm sure you’re right about the girl. Prue and I had just worked all that out for ourselves.”

Guy looked a little abashed and got to his feet as the other boys came up. Prue wrinkled her nose and added her condemnation.

“You all smell,” she added tersely. ‘Horribly. Please stand the other side.”

“Never mind about our smelling,” was Mark’s sensible contribution. “The point is, what are we going to do now ? We’ve found out something important, haven’t we ?”

Mandy nodded.

“Yes, we have. And I think I’ve discovered something important too. I suppose the really important thing though is to find out where that boat came from. P’raps Sandy knows ?”

But Sandy shook his head.

“Dunno as ’ow I do, but I reckon I could soon find out. Wouldn’t take me long to ask a few blokes round ’ere,” and he fidgeted about rather like a young and frisky terrier on a lead for the first time.

The tide was coming up fast now, and but for the

fact that the boys had dragged the dinghy a few yards up the mud it might have been re-floated. The river was much busier too. From the opposite side came the rattle of cranes, and three tugs with barges behind them followed each other up the stream.

“Shall I cut off and find someone who might know that boat ?” Sandy persisted. “We got to do something besides hanging about here all day, ’aven’t we ?”

“Yes, we have,” Guy agreed as he pushed the plait in his pocket; “and I suppose we ought to take this clue to the police, or try to find your father. What do you think, Mandy? And what’s wrong, anyway ? What have you got on your mind ?”

Mandy turned towards the moored barges and the empty dinghy. “Sorry, Guy,” she said, “but I’ve got to tell you that I think I know that man in the tweed cap who rowed that dinghy across there. He’s on the barges now I told you he reminded me of someone, didn’t I?”

“Who ?”

“Sounds crazy I know, but I’m as certain as I can be that it’s William Mrs. Hawkins’ butler that I told you about.”

Guy laughed. “The man you call the Bishop? P’raps you mean the Archbishop of Canterbury? Nonsense, Mandy. You’re dreaming!”

Mandy flushed angrily and turned to face him.

“So I'm dreaming? I don’t think I am, Guy. I felt uneasy as soon as I saw him rowing out from underneath that old house over there. Somehow he looked furtive, and yet he rowed slowly just as he does everything else. Prue will tell you how odd I felt about him when I first saw him.”

Prue nodded. She understood anybody who had unaccountable feelings. She so often had them herself.

Guy looked puzzled.

“But Mandy—how could it be the butler? How could he be here rowing out to a lot of old barges and in Chelsea at the same time ?”

“Don’t you see, Guy? But of course you don’t, ’cos you weren’t there. I’ve remembered. He wasn’t there this morning. A woman opened the door to us. We didn’t see William at all.”

“But even if it was William, Mandy, what does that mean ?”

She came close to him and put a hand on his arm and led him up two steps away from the others.

“I’ll tell you, Guy, but it’s so crazy that I’d rather not tell the others yet. Suppose you and I prove that

it is William ? Are you game ?”

Guy acted quickly.

“All right, Mandy. I’ll stay with you. I can see you mean this.”

Then he went back to the others who were fidgeting about at the foot of the steps and watching them suspiciously.

“Mandy has got an idea about this chap who is now on those barges, and I’ve promised to stay with her until we’ve settled him one way or the other. There’s no sense in our all staying here looks silly, anyway so will you all go back to the Police Station with the plait and then split up, if you like, and search for the girl with the scarf? And you’re in charge of the party, Mark, and you’ll take young Sandy because he can guide you anywhere and is the one who knows the girl best.”

“What are you two going to do, and where shall we Meet? Mark asked peevishly. “It’s going to be boring for us at the Police Station and just wandering about in a mob. Much more fun here for us all.”

“Please, Mark,” Mandy said. “It will spoil everything if we all stay here. I'm sure that man is watching us from the barges, and anyway someone must go back and tell the others about this dinghy and the plait and the footsteps in the mud. And don’t get too

mixed up with the police and grown-ups, Mark, J.D. is different, of course. I feel rather mean about leaving him."

"That's all very well," Mark said, "but we ought to be disguised. Everybody stares at us all the time, and we can't do much detecting that way, What's the matter with us, Sandy ? Why does everyone look at us as if we were peculiar ?"

But Sandy only laughed, and after some further argument, during which Guy was quietly stubborn and Mandy walked away and watched the barges, the others went up the stairs into Rosemary Lane after agreeing to meet eventually at Joe's or to leave a message there.

"Sure you wouldn't like me to stay with you, Mandy ?" Prue asked wistfully as Guy passed the plait to his brother. "I was afraid you wouldn't. Anyway, if you have any news leave a message at Joe's if we're not there first. I've got an idea we'll be taken away somewhere in a Police Van when they find us. After all, we've run away from them. Cheerio. Good luck."

As soon as they were alone Mandy turned impulsively and said, "That was decent of you, Guy. Do you really believe that the man on those barges is William ?"

"I believe that you think he is, and that's worth investigating. He's still there, isn't he ?"

“I’ve been watching carefully, and if he has gone he’s taken a boat which we can’t see and rowed across to the other bank. The boat he came in is still there. You can see it for yourself. What shall we do, Guy ?”

“Row over ourselves and see who it is,” Guy said promptly. “If it’s nor William we’ll make some excuse and if it its William he can’t pretend not to know us. We’ll row over in the dinghy where we found the plait, but we’ll have to hurry else the tide will set her afloat again. Are you game, Mandy? Do you mind getting your feet dirty ?”

For answer Mandy sat down on the second of the slimy stairs the bottom step was now covered by the rising tide and stripped off her shoes and stockings.

“Stuff these in your pocket for me, Guy,” she said as she passed him the latter. “I’ll carry the shoes.”

Guy’s own shoes and socks were already so wet and filthy that he did not trouble to take them off but jumped down to the mud and held out his hand to Mandy, who followed him rather more cautiously.

The mud was horrible as horrible as it looked from above and ten times as smelly. Mandy shrank at its icy coldness and at the way that the slime oozed between her toes. There were all sorts of things in it, too: pieces of old iron, bits of rope, a broken basket, a bicycle wheel, and suddenly Mandy felt sick and,

without realizing what she was doing, reached out and grabbed Guy's arm. He turned in surprise, for he knew now how independent she liked to think she was, but had the sense to say nothing when, with a shaking finger, she pointed to the corpse of a very dead cat half in and half out of the mud.

They were about ten yards from the dinghy when Mandy's right foot sank more deeply than usual into the mud and she felt a vicious pain as something sharp bit into the soft flesh of her instep. She could not help crying out, and when Guy turned and said, "What's wrong now ?" she was furious because she could feel tears in her eyes.

If he did notice them he had the sense once again to say nothing, but held her arm and took her shoes while she balanced herself on one leg and pulled the other from the mud with a loud sucking noise.

Through a horrid coating of black slime the blood was oozing from a long, ugly cut. She laughed shakily. "That was silly! Bit of glass in the mud, I suppose. I was a fool to take my shoes off, Guy."

"Don't put that foot back in the mud," Guy said. "Just balance for a sec. while I get rid of these," and he tossed her shoes ahead of him into the dinghy.

"Now!" he went on. "'Be sensible and don't make a

fuss. I can't get you all the way back, so we'll have to

go on," and suddenly he stooped and lifted her in his arms.
"Let me go "' she began, and then started to laugh as he lurched and nearly overbalanced. It was a difficult journey, and they were both very red when he dropped her rather clumsily into the dinghy.

"I shouldn't have thought it!" he said when he found his breath again.

"Thought what?" she said with flaming cheeks. "That is, if you can think!"

"Shouldn't have thought you ate twice as much as I do, but I'm sure you're twice the weight. Now let's look at that foot."

"You wouldn't have a clean handkerchief, I suppose ?" Mandy said as she meekly stretched out her muddy leg.

"I shouldn't think so either. I suppose I shall have to tear up my coat, and that will be a nuisance because the wind is cold."

But he had got a handkerchief, and Mandy was able to produce one, too.

"I don't think you'd better use river water to wash it," Guy said. "Spit on your bit of a handkerchief and get yourself as clean as you can, and then use mine to tie round it. What shall we do then? Row back to

the steps and call an ambulance ?”

Mandy was feeling unpleasantly shaky, but she managed a weak sort of grin. This was one of the times when she really liked Guy.

“We’ll do nothing of the sort. We’ll go right over to the barges and see what’s happening there. As soon as I’ve got this tied up I’ll be all right. No thanks, Guy I can manage this myself.”

“Don’t be afraid to spit, then. No need to be ladylike about it. You’ll have to get that clean and let it bleed a bit. Of course I ought to have carried you all the way,” he added as he slipped the oars in the rowlocks.

He managed the boat well, and Mandy, between spitting and licking and cleaning, gave him his directions.

“Bit more to your right, Guy.”

“ ‘Port’, please, Mandy. How’s the wound ?”’ She made no answer and he saw her eyes widen with excitement as she watched something over his shoulder.

Then. “Guy! I was right. It s William. He’s seen us coming and is waiting for us. Shall I wave ?”

“Why not? But just before we get there, Mandy, tell me your idea. Why do you think he’s here ?”

“I think maybe that he’s acting for Mrs. Hawkins,

who doesn't trust Mr. Trevor. I know this sounds crazy, Guy, but I don't like that Mr. Trevor and / don't trust him, either. I don't believe he's really trying to find Belinda."

Guy stopped rowing.

"You're still losing blood," he said. "Is it making you light-headed ?"

"No, Guy. I've been suspicious of Mr. Trevor all along. I said something to Mrs. Hawkins about it, and I thought she was a bit peculiar then. Anyway, back, rather like a bishop giving his blessing. You'd better go on rowing much more port, else the tide will carry us past. A lot more port, Guy!"

There was silence for a few minutes while Guy brought the dinghy on her course again, and then Mandy tied the last knot in the handkerchief round her foot and, wishing she did not still feel so sick and shaky, called out:

"Good morning, William! We never expected to find you here."

"Good morning, miss," came the solemn reply. "If you could manage to pass up the end of that rope I can fasten your boat securely that is, if it is your intention to come aboard here. Good morning to you, sir," he added, as Guy shipped his oars, jumped up besides him, and held out his hand to Mandy.

Then they all three stood and looked at each other . while the river traffic swept past the moored barges and the gulls screamed over their heads.
At last William spoke: “I trust you have not hurt yourself seriously, miss ?”’

“Not very badly, thank you, but I’d like to sit down. Let’s all sit here in the sunshine and tell each other why we’re here,” she said, a little too brightly to be convincing.

“I was about to ask you that question, miss,” William agreed as he seated himself uncomfortably on the edge of a wooden box, “but I imagine we are all here on the same quest.”

Guy did not like William. He did not like the way in which his little eyes flickered over and round them when he was talking and yet never directly at them. He looked awkward and out of place in his dark suit and brown tweed cap, and Guy was certain that he was trying to hide his displeasure at their presence and would be thankful when they went. Mandy was either being very clever or very stupid in the way she chattered on, but it was not long before she made William admit that he had come out on his own to search for Belinda to please his mistress.

“As it seems that you have come for the same purpose,” he added without looking directly at either o them, “it would, perhaps, be advisable for us to exchange

news. Perhaps you have learned something since I left Chelsea early this morning ?”

Mandy flashed a look of triumph to Guy and then faced William squarely.

“Tell us this, William. Do you believe that Mr Trevor is really trying to find Belinda? I don’t.”

Guy did not think this was a wise question and was not altogether surprised when William evaded it. From this moment, too, the man’s attitude seemed to change and Guy sensed that he, and not they, were controlling the situation. His voice was different as he began to cross-question them sharper and with more authority. Mandy began to flounder a little, and Guy did his best to prevent her giving a direct answer to the questions. Mandy made another effort.

“But you haven’t told us, William, why you rowed yourself over here. Did you think you might find Belinda here ?”

“I think, miss,” he replied, “that it would perhaps be wiser if you would leave this matter in the hands of adults and the police. May I suggest that there is little you, or any of your friends, can do in a matter as serious as this. And doubtless, as your foot needs attention, it would be advisable if this young gentleman rowed you ashore now.”

“But we have done a lot, William. We’ve done more

than anyone else. We've found out that Belinda was in that little boat that we came over in. We found it deserted there on the mud, and Guy here found one of her plaits in it, and we saw her footsteps leading across the mud to the stairs. The others have gone to the Police Station now with the plait and with that news, so you see, William, that we've done more than ow! Don't Guy. Leave me alone."

While she had been speaking Guy had been watching William's face. He saw his expression change at the news of the finding of the plait; saw his loose mouth harden when the police were mentioned and it was at this point that the boy gripped Mandy's knee as a warning to stop her saying so much.

Then William was himself again.

"Very interesting and commendable, I'm sure, miss; but I see that your foot needs some attention whatever you decide to do. If you will wait here I will see if there is First-Aid equipment anywhere. I have ascertained that this hut is often occupied. Excuse me, miss," and he walked off ponderously and left them staring at each other.

"Why did you do that, Guy? There was nothing wrong in telling him that, was there ?" she asked as soon as the butler was out of earshot.

"I'm not sure. I don't trust him, Mandy. He's a rotter, I'm sure. He's got little eyes like a pig's. He

was making you tell him everything we knew and telling us nothing himself. Stay here a sec. I'm going to see what he's up to."

It did not take him long to find out, for William had taken every possible advantage of a few minutes' start. As Guy ran up the deck to the other side of the hut where the two dinghies had been moored, he saw that his worst suspicions were justified. The dinghy in which he had brought Mandy across had been cut adrift and was already floating up the river with the tide, while William, in the other boat, was rowing furiously towards the Surrey side.

When Guy shouted, William barely glanced in his

direction, but there was an expression on his pale face that made the boy shiver with fear. He stood for a long minute watching the receding dinghy, and was only roused by the feel of Mandy's hand inside his arm.
"Sorry, Guy," she said. "You were right and I was wrong about him. He's made a fool of us. Now we must get ashore as quickly as we can and give the alarm. There's plenty on the river now, and I'm sure some boat will pick us up."

This wasn't as easy as it sounded. Two tugs and some barges passed; but although they shouted and waved, all that happened was that the man on the bridge waved back quite cheerily. Mandy's foot was still painful and the wound was bleeding, so in between

shouting and waving Guy tore up his handkerchief and covered the cut so that Mandy could wear her shoes. She limped badly but pretended that it was not hurting her too much. They soon noticed the broken window of the hut, and when they peered inside and saw the remains of fresh food on the table, Guy guessed that Linda had been imprisoned here and had escaped in the dinghy, and that William had come over expecting to find her.

Then another tug came round the bed of the river, and with a shout of triumph Mandy hopped up and down on one foot and waved her coat over her head.

“It’s the Happy Days, Guy. That’s Mr. Burton’s tug. Shout and yell like mad, Guy! I can see him on the bridge now. Oh, Guy! Isn’t he marvellous? Isn’t he a pet? He’s seen us!”

“He’s slowing down and coming in a bit,” Guy said. “He won’t be able to stop. Keep quiet, Mandy. I'll do the talking!”

Mandy snorted with disgust, but realized that Guy’s voice was probably louder than hers. She soon realized, too, that Guy was saying what had to be said in fewer words than she would have used.

“Hullo, Mr. Burton. You remember us, don’t you ? We came with your boy yesterday. We’re prisoners here and we’ve got important news for the police. Can you help us to get away and tell them? Our

dinghy has been cut adrift."

The Happy Days was very close now with her screw threshing the muddy water as she was put astern. After the first look of utter amazement had passed from her master's face, Mr. Burton acted quickly.

"Can't stop and take you off," he roared. "Hold on, kids, and I'll send help."

A man and a boy, who constituted the crew of the tug, waved cheerily to Mandy as the Happy Days went full speed ahead again.

"Good enough!" Guy said. "Now we needn't worry. I'm going to break down the door of that hut and get something to eat. I wonder how the others have got on. If we don't turn up at Joe's soon do you think they'll come down those stairs again to look for us ?"

Mandy's foot was hurting abominably, and, although she didn't like to admit it, she was wondering whether the cut was poisoned she almost longed for the sting of iodine! Now that she was sure that they would soon be rescued, she didn't care very much what happened so she sat down on one of the old boxes and said, "Go ahead, Guy. Break the whole place up if you like. I never want to see it again."

It took Guy some minutes and a great deal of effort to force the door of the hut with a strip of iron which was lying nearby. Then they found that the milk in

the half-empty bottle was not really stale and that there was some cold tea still in the pot. They were enjoying the remains of the dates when a cheerful voice hailed them.

“Anybody aboard, or is the master of the Happy Days dreaming ?”

They ran out of the hut with their mouths full, to find a good-looking policeman on the deck and a sleek police launch rocking alongside.

Then everything began to happen very fast. Guy told his story quickly and well. Mandy described William and what he was wearing, and a warning was radioed by one of the other officers of the launch.

“Where was this man you call William coming from when you first saw him, miss?”’ the good-looking policeman asked, and Mandy pointed to the ruined house that stood on piers above the water’s edge.

“Right! Come aboard, you two. What’s the matter, young lady? Cut your foot? Harry! Have a look at it. First-Aid box in the locker.”

Almost before she realized she was aboard, Mandy’s shoe was off and Guy’s clumsy bandages removed. The skin round the cut was washed clean with spirit, and then she had her wish as the iodine trickled into the cut.

“All over now, miss,” a kind voice said when she opened her eyes again. “You’ll be O.K. after the dressing is on.”

Suddenly, as her shoe went on again, she realized that the light was growing dim. She looked up and saw that they were floating underneath the house she had pointed out to them from the barges.

The Inspector was smiling down at her.

“See that trap-door above you? This is an old inn, derelict since the Blitz, and not so very long ago it was used by smugglers. Now you two youngsters must go ashore, and I’ll be glad if you’ll go back to the Police Station. We’ve told them you’re on your way!”

“But, sir,” Guy pleaded, “can’t we stay here and see the fun? Aren’t you going to raid this place ?”

“Sorry, son, but you’ll do as I say, if you please. You’ve had enough fun and enough escapes for one morning, I should reckon. Look after this young lady and have a doctor look at that foot. Get back to Limehouse Police Station as quick as you can, and thanks for what you’ve done. Just edge round to the steps, George, and put ’em ashore, and then we’ll get busy. I’ve an idea we’ll find some birds in this nest.”

And so, still protesting, Guy and Mandy were put ashore, and Harry told them which way to turn to find Rosemary Lane.

“Maybe I’ll be seeing you, kids,” he said with a grin. “Take care of that foot, and send for me again if you want any more nursing.”

Mandy gave him a radiant smile, and then when Guy muttered something about “not having much practice with bandaging”, she gave him another and said, “Anyway, Guy, he is a very nice-looking policeman; and remember that I’d probably have my leg off by now if you hadn’t carried me over the mud after the damage was done.”

Guy didn’t know quite what to make of this, but seemed to like it.

As soon as they turned into Rosemary Lane they heard the clang of a fire-engine’s bell and saw the engine cross the street higher up. Then another, and another.

Guy started to run.

“Don’t mind me,” Mandy said indignantly. “Just run off and play by yourself, Guy Standing. I can stroll up here easily by myself. . . . See you later.”

“Sorry, Mandy. I can’t resist fires. Make your own pace, or would you like me to carry you again ?”

They came to Joe’s, and Guy looked in; but none of the others was there.

“Let’s just look at the fire, Mandy,” he said, “and then we’ll come back here and leave a message to say we’ve gone to the Police Station. It must be just round the corner.”

So they joined the crowd hurrying round the corner, and found themselves in a narrow cul-de-sac. Guy pointed ahead, and they saw smoke pouring from the unglazed windows on the top floor of a half-ruined warehouse at the end of the street. Already the firemen were busy and a jet of water hissed upwards as they hurried on.

“I can see the others,” Mandy yelled suddenly.

“There’s J.D. and Prue. And there’s Mark and young Sandy hopping about in front. Look at Prue, Guy: she’s pointing up there. Hullo, J.D. darling! Here we are and lots of news. Hullo you others. Is everything all right? Wait till you hear our news. What is it, Prue? What’s wrong ?”

The others crowded round excitedly, but Prue’s tragic voice quietened them and the other men and women standing near.

“I’m sure I saw someone standing on that ledge on the roof in all that smoke. Look, all of you! Look now yes, it 75 someone. It’s a little boy waving a handkerchief. Mandy! It isn’t a boy! Mandy! Surely that must be little Belinda ? and she’s up there alone.

What shall we do ?” and with a wild cry she covered her face in her hands.

J.D., rather absent-mindedly, had slipped an arm round her shoulder; but while she was speaking he had been looking up at the roof. Suddenly he dropped his hand.

“You’re right, Prue! There is a child up there. Stay here a sec., all of you. I’ll soon be back,” and he pushed through the crowd, jumped over two hoses, and dashed into the dark entrance of the warehouse.

“Hi! Wait for us!” Guy yelled as, with Mark, he dodged two angry firemen and followed J.D.

Chapter ten.

Fire!.

The warehouse into which Belinda fled had been bombed during the war. One side of it was a ruin with no outside wall, and although the whole building had once been boarded off from the street, the boys and girls of Wapping had, for a long time now, made the ground-floor and basement a playground.

There is something forbidding and frightening about the upper floors of a deserted house, and not even Sandy, who had often explored the ruins on the street level, had ventured up more than one flight of the concrete stairs which led from floor to floor.

But Belinda's fears were not of the unknown. She remembered only that a few minutes ago she had been happy and excited because she had escaped from her enemies, and then that the most hated of all her captors was, almost magically, now just behind her and reaching out to drag her back to the horrors of the cabin of the London Pride and the empty room in the deserted house above the river.

Her courage deserted her and she ran with the desperation that comes only to the hunted. It is true that fear lends wings to them, for as Linda ran across the yard, littered with piles of rubble, her feet seemed barely to touch the ground. Just before she reached the entrance from which the big doors had been wrenched years ago, she glanced back and saw that Joyce was not more than ten yards behind her. She was running fast, but awkwardly, in shoes with high heels, and her painted mouth was open. Over her head she still wore the scarf of London.

Linda dashed into the twilight of the ground-floor and faltered as she looked round. There was no way out and only one way up a steep flight of concrete stairs against the wall and with no hand-rail on the other side. Joyce's steps echoed sharply through the shadows as she ran through the entrance, and then Linda began to climb the steps.

The next few minutes were like a nightmare, and Linda did indeed pray that she might wake and find

herself in her own bed at home as she dragged her weary feet up the second flight of stairs. Each stride now was an effort. Her heart was thudding and her mouth dry as she ran across the floor to the third flight. Each floor, as she reached it, was lighter than the last. There was no glass in any of the windows and a cold wind stirred the straw and piles of rubbish with which the place was littered.

Joyce was gaining now and Linda heard her gasping only a few paces behind her, but she gained a little when the older girl paused to shout, “Come back, you little fool! Might as well make up your mind to it. You can’t get no further. Why don’t you just come with me quiet and sensible? We’ve got some good news for you.”

Linda was at the top of the third flight when she heard this, but she barely paused as she shouted back, “What good news ?”

“Your Gran is ready for your now. Stop fooling, kid, and come along of me and I’ll take you to her.”

“I’d rather jump out of the window than come with you,” Linda gasped. “I hate you and your father and mother,” and she turned and ran towards the next flight of steps, without realizing that she was running into a trap.

This particular floor was almost knee-deep in rubbish and the packing from twenty or thirty crates, portions

of which had been left untidily where they had been forced open. Linda struggled forward, dodged round three packing-cases, and started desperately up the next flight.

There was nothing else she could do; but when she reached the top and looked round she realized that this was the last floor. There was no way out. No more stairs and only one way back the road where her enemy was waiting for her!

Over by the glassless windows was a great hole in the floor, but there was nowhere to hide except, perhaps, behind a pile of packing cases in the far corner. ' Just at this very moment, when her danger was greatest and she realized that there was no escape, she forgot the panic of her mad flight up the endless stone steps, found her courage again, and turned to face Joyce, whose head was just appearing up the stairs.

Linda leaned back against the packing-cases and watched her. As soon as the elder girl saw her and realized that this was the last floor and that there was no way out, she stopped. For a long moment the two girls stared at each other without speaking, but it was Joyce who looked away first and, to cover her annoyance, fumbled in her bag and lit a cigarette.

Then Linda said, “Give me back my scarf, you thief, and then get out.”

Joyce flushed under her make-up. This was not at

all what she had expected to happen.

“Are you coming with me quiet?” she snapped.
“Or have I got to come and fetch you?”
“You can’t fetch me,” Linda said quietly. “You know very well you can’t. I don’t suppose you could catch me, and even if you were lucky enough to do that you couldn’t take me anywhere. I’d fight and struggle, and you’re just not big enough nor strong enough to carry me. You’d better go back to your dirty boats I’m staying here.”

Linda was breathless after this defiant speech, but it had a very considerable effect on her opponent, who licked her painted lips nervously and tried again.

“Now listen, kid, and just be sensible. You come with me and I’ll take you to your Gran.”

“I don’t believe you,” Linda said. ‘“My Granny would never choose anyone like you to take me to her. I think you’re wicked and cruel. Give me back my scarf.”

Joyce’s mean little face hardened as she flung away her cigarette.

“0.K.!” she said. “You’ve asked for it, and now you are going to get it come ’ere!”

However brave Linda’s words had sounded, she felt a horrid little stab of fear when she saw the cruelty

in the other's face as she put her hand-bag on the floor at the top of the, stairs and took a step towards her.

"Stop!" she shouted. "You'd better not touch me. Before I ran away from you, I'd just telephoned to my Granny from a call-box. All my friends are coming now to find me and help me. Your father and mother will be caught, and if you touch me I'll tell everybody what you've done to me."

Just for a second Joyce stopped and then said, "But even if what you say isn't a lie, your precious friends don't know where to find you, do they, duckie ? We'll have to hurry and get away from here before they come. Come here!" and she suddenly dashed forward.

Instinctively Linda dodged back behind the packing-cases as panic surged up again and then, too late, realized that she was in a corner from which there was no escape unless she found the strength to move the packing-cases away from the wall. As she strained to do this she felt a cold ridge of something hard against her back. She turned, looked up, and realized that she had found an iron ladder, built flat to the wall, which led up to a small trap-door in the ceiling. The bottom rung of the ladder was about two feet from the floor, and even as Linda began to climb she realized that this must be a way up to the roof.

She was only four rungs high when Joyce dodged

round the packing-cases and made a grab at her feet. Instinctively Linda kicked out and, with some satisfaction, felt her heel land on the other's shoulder. Then she climbed another three rungs and looked down to see when the next attack was coming.

But Joyce, although absent-mindedly rubbing her shoulder, was not looking at Linda. She was standing still and sniffing. Then she coughed and Linda, several feet above, coughed too and felt her eyes pricking.

Almost at the same instant both girls realized that smoke was pouring up the staircase, and in the silence which followed this realization they both heard the crackle of flames from somewhere behind them.

With a shout of "Fire!" Joyce, without another glance at Linda, dodged round the packing-cases and ran across the floor to the head of the stairs. Linda, although she was still high enough to see over the top of the boxes, was never quite sure what happened next. She saw Joyce stop to pick up her hand-bag and then the girl must have slipped on the top step for suddenly, with a wild cry, she disappeared into the clouds of smoke which were pouring up the stairs.

Then Linda forgot all her own old terrors. She thought of Joyce who was certainly in great danger, for it seemed as if she had fallen down the steps into a fire. Linda climbed down the iron ladder, squeezed past the packing-cases, and ran across to the head of the stairs and peered down through the drifting smoke.

She saw at once that the piles of straw and rubbish which littered the floor below were well alight and that the fire was spreading as the wind whistled in through the open windows and drew the smoke and flames up towards the stairs and the old lift shaft which ran from top to bottom of the building.

She went down a few steps and then, through the drifting smoke, saw Joyce lying very still in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, with the flames from a heap of burning straw near her feet.

“Joyce!” she shouted in a panic. “Joyce! Wake up! What happened ?”

The girl stirred, tried to get to her knees, and then, with a cry of pain, put a hand round her ankle. When she looked up and saw Linda she called, in a very different tone of voice,

“Something’s happened to my ankle. I can’t move properly. Come down and help me, kid, before the fire gets me,” and then she tried to drag herself up the bottom stair away from the flames.

Linda was very frightened when she saw how quickly the fire was spreading, and that it was fiercest over by the stairs that led down to the next floor. Here several crates were already burning and she could see at once that there was no escape for either of them by trying to go down. But surely they would be safe on the top floor until the fire had burned itself out? But would

it burn itself out so easily, for she realized with a sudden shock that this was an old warehouse and that the floors were of wood.

Then she forgot everything except that somehow or other she had got to get Joyce away from the flames and up the stairs to the top floor which was their only chance of safety. It was fortunate for them both that Joyce was neither big nor heavy, and certainly she did all that she could to help herself. She even gave Linda a smile, that might have been of thanks, when the little girl kneeled beside her.

“You’ve got to get up the stairs,” Linda explained. “You’ve just got to. We can’t get down ’cos the fire’s too bad. I’ll do what I can, but you’ve got to do most.”

The next five minutes were horrible. Both girls forgot their enmity as they struggled towards safety. It was soon obvious that the elder’s ankle was broken or very badly sprained, for she could not put any weight on it and even the slightest movement caused her so much pain that she cried out as she tried in vain to stand. There was nothing of the bully left in her now: she was just a very frightened girl in great pain. Her face was white and dirty under her make-up, and streaked by the track of tears. Her cheap coat was crumpled and dirty where she had rolled in the dust down the stairs, and one stocking was torn from knee to ankle.

First she tried to crawl on hands and knees up each step, with Linda's hand under her arm, but she could not manage more than two before nearly fainting.

"You must! You must!" Linda begged her. "We must get up, Joyce. The fire over in that corner is much worse, although all the straw at the bottom of the stairs has burned itself out now. Once we're up to the top, Joyce, the fire can't get us and I'm sure I can go and wave and shout from the windows. Luckily the smoke isn't quite as bad now. Do try again, Joyce! I'm just not big enough to carry you. Do try! Just another two steps, and then we'll rest again, but we must keep on trying you do see that, don't you ?"

Joyce saw it only too clearly; but although nothing seemed more important than to get to the next floor, the pain in her foot was so great that she did not believe that she would manage it. She was only three steps higher when another packing-case in the corner by the next flight of stairs below them burst into flames and a gust of smoke and sparks rushing up the lift shaft warned them that the fire was gaining a firm hold on more than one floor.

Then Joyce collapsed. She lay face downwards on the steps with her head on her arms and sobbed. She could go no further. The fire was just behind her, and even if she got to the top of the stairs it would only be a matter of time before they were both trapped on the top floor. She could feel Linda shaking her shoulder and then, perhaps for the first time for many years,

she thought of somebody besides herself. She realized that this defenceless little girl who had been kidnapped, ill-treated, and bullied for two days and nights, and who had every reason to hate her, had now deliberately come down the stairs into a fire which she, Joyce, had started by her own carelessness in throwing away a lighted cigarette, and now, without a thought of herself or any complaint, was doing all she could to save her. Making a supreme effort she raised herself, twisted round and sat on the stairs. When the pain from her ankle had subsided a little, she turned to Linda and tried a shaky smile.

“What’s yer name, kid ?” she asked gently.

“Belinda. They call me Linda. Do you think you could try again, Joyce ?”

“You’re a good kid, Linda. You’re grand. I reckon I feel bad about all this now. I’m sorry, Linda! You cut up those stairs now and shout and wave from the windows. Leave me here. I’ll be O.K. I’ll get up somehow in a minute.”

Linda’s eyes widened in surprise. For a moment she was suspicious but only for a moment. Then she leaned down and put her hands under Joyce’s arms.

“Of course I shan’t leave you. I’ve just had an idea, Joyce! Why didn’t we think of it before? Come up the stairs, sitting down, backwards, one at a time. I’ll help you.”

And that was how they managed it, although when they reached the top Joyce rolled over sideways in a faint. Somehow Linda dragged her a little way from the stairs, and then looked round in despair. Below her the fire was raging fiercely, and although there was not as much smoke on the top floor now, the heat was intense and Linda was very frightened. She did not know whether to help Joyce or to try and climb the iron ladder to the roof and shout for help. Then she heard the bell of the first fire-engine and ran across the floor to the gaps in the wall which once had been windows. When she peered through she saw a ledge, gutter and coping about a foot wide. She climbed out cautiously and, with both hands on the ledge, looked down. The street seemed very far away, but she saw the fire-engine pull up and a lot of tiny white blobs, which were the upturned faces of people. Even as she stood upright and waved and shouted she realized that nobody below would expect to see her, nor, indeed, anybody else, on the top floor of a warehouse which had obviously been deserted and empty for a long time. A fresh gust of smoke whirled round her and stung her eyes, and although she waved again she felt sure that it was hopeless to do so for nobody would be able to see her from so far below.

When she got back Joyce's eyes were open and she was struggling to move herself further away from the stairs. She gave Linda a smile twisted with pain.

"I wondered where you were, Linda. This foot

is pretty bad, kid. What shall we do?' and as she spoke she glanced down the stairs and had no need to add that their chances of rescue from below were surely hopeless.

Linda kneeled down beside her.

"Listen, Joyce. I'm going up that iron ladder again 'cos I think there's a way out to the roof. I must shout from up there, and maybe they'll see me. The fire-engines have come, Joyce, and maybe they can get ladders up as high as this and rescue us from outside. Will you be all right, Joyce, if I leave you here alone for a bit? I promise I won't be long."

Joyce nodded. "Don't be long, Linda. I'll be watching you here. Good luck!"

Once again Linda squeezed past the crates in the corner and climbed the iron ladder. A bolt held the trap-door fast, and as it was rusty she had a great struggle to move it with one hand. At last it slipped from its socket and Linda pushed upwards with all her strength. Slowly the door moved on its hinges, and then opened upwards as a rush of cold, fresh air came in. Linda, after a smile and wave to Joyce on the floor below, scrambled out on to the roof. She saw at once, however, that this part of the roof was out of sight of the crowds in the street below and that a parapet, too high for her to climb, would prevent her from being seen or heard, however much she might wave and shout. It was obvious that this particular

part of the flat roof covered another wing of the warehouse which she had not known existed.

Linda was only a little girl, but perhaps because she had no mother she had become very self-reliant and plucky for her age. During the last ten minutes she had done as much as nine out of ten adults could have done, and was now feeling tired and frightened and hurt. She just did not dare to think of what might happen to them both unless she could get some help, but although she could no longer keep the tears from her eyes, she never once considered deserting Joyce. Suddenly it occurred to her that there might be more than one trap-door in so large a roof, and that it might be worth trying to get down another way to find help. She ran back a few yards to the door she had just opened, went down on her hands and knees, and peered through.

She felt the hot, smoky air on her face and saw the red glint of flames reflected up the staircase near which Joyce was still lying.

“You all right, Joyce ? I shan’t be long,” she yelled. “Just going to explore a bit.”

Joyce waved feebly and although Linda was not sure of the exact words of her reply she thought she said, “Have they seen you? Are they coming?” She did not dare to answer either of these questions, but just smiled as reassuringly as she could and went back to the roof.

She found the second trap-door within two minutes. There was a ring in the centre, but she tugged at this in vain for it was obviously bolted on the inside.

Frantically now she ran on round the roof in the hope of finding another door, but without success. At one end she found herself looking down on the Thames, and she could even see the moored barges in midstream where she had been imprisoned last night; but there was no way of getting help from the river.

Panic was very near now. She stumbled twice and fell headlong as she tore back along the leads of the roof the way she had come. What could she do? There was no way in which she could help Joyce up the iron ladder to safety, and she was quite sure that the elder girl would not be able to manage by herself. And yet she could not leave her there alone, to be suffocated by the fire which, sooner or later, must reach the top floor. What could she do ?

She tugged again at the iron ring of the closed trap-door and beat on it with her hands. Then, in despair, she sat down on the roof, drew up her knees to her chin, and made no further effort to check the tears which trickled down her grimy cheeks and fell on the knees of the dirty dungarees. She gulped, sniffed and glanced again at the closed trap-door.

She looked again, got up, put her hand to her mouth and screamed. The door was opening! Opening out towards her! Then she jumped forward, seized the

iron ring and tugged so hard that, with a helping hand from below, the door flew back and sent her toppling on to her back.

As she got up, a tall boy with tousled head and glasses was pulling himself up to the roof.

“That’s odd,” he was saying to someone below him, “but it felt as if someone gave that door a heave from above.”

Then he saw Linda.

“Hullo!” he said, as if he had just met her casually in the street. “I think you must be the important person we’ve come to find. Are you Belinda ?”

She nodded. There are no words to fit a miracle.

The boy looked down behind him again.

“Prue was right, Mr. Jillions she did see someone on the parapet. Here’s the missing Belinda, safe and sound, but looking a little tired. Let me give you a hand, sir.”

Then a jolly man with a baldish head and a little beard came up through the hole. He took one look at Linda, picked her up and rubbed her face against the rough tweed of his shoulder, and then ran comforting fingers through the stubble of her shorn head. At any other time Linda would have considered that she

was several years too old to be picked up and hugged like this, but it was very pleasant to feel safe at last. Just as another younger boy heaved himself up out of the hole, she remembered Joyce!

“Put me down and come quickly,” she gasped. “Come at once. There’s another girl down there in the fire and she’s broken her ankle I think, and can’t move. Come quickly and save her,” and she led the way over to the other trap-door.

“Joyce!” she yelled. “It’s all right, Joyce. We’re saved! We’re rescued. My friends have found us. Are you all right, Joyce ?”

There was no answer from the still form lying near the top of the stairs up which smoke was pouring. There was much more smoke than flames on the top floor now, and, although they did not know it, this was because the firemen were gaining control by pouring in water from outside through the open windows.

Mr. Jillions gently pushed Linda aside and looked down into the inferno. Then, “Stay here, child. Look after her, Mark,” he said abruptly. “You come with me, Guy,” and he started to climb down the iron ladder.

“Mind her ankle!” Linda called. “I think it’s very badly hurt.” Then she sat back and looked at Mark approvingly. “Hullo!” she smiled. “I bet I look awful,

don't I? You're not the boy who saw me when I was a prisoner in the cabin of the London Pride, are you? You're bigger. And there was a girl too."

Mark laughed. He liked her. She was filthy dirty and thoroughly disreputable in a grubby suit of blue dungarees. Her shoes and socks were coated with black mud, but there was still a gleam in her clumsily cropped hair. And although her dirty little face was streaked with tears, her eyes were bright with excitement as she smiled at him.

"You'll soon meet Tim," Mark said. "He's a great lad. Are you all right yourself now? We'll soon get you down. Look!].D. has lifted her on his back and Guy's going to help him up the ladder."

It was as well that Joyce had fainted again for she felt no pain as they hoisted her up to the roof and then got her down the other trap-door into a different part of the warehouse, which was not threatened by the fire.

"Run on ahead with this child, Mark," J.D. said. "Find Trevor and tell him and the police that we've got her safe and sound. Tell them to send for an ambulance for this girl, who'll be round in a minute. You'd better give me a hand, Guy. I'll want you."

Now Linda danced along beside Mark as if she had not a care in the world. She was safe at last, and in a few minutes somebody really kind would take her to Granny, and perhaps she could soon have a bath.

She was away from the fire and Joyce was saved too, and she hadn't to worry about her any more. Suddenly everything was wonderful, and Mark tried not to look surprised when she put her small and grubby hand into his and said, "You're a very nice boy. I like you."

He led her down two more staircases and then along a corridor which brought them to the ground floor with the broken doors through which she had run not very long ago. After that everything became even more confusing and exciting, and if it had not been for Mark she would almost have been torn apart. She remembered a fireman speaking to her, and then a mob of people all crowding round and all asking questions. The fire-engines were throbbing and forcing up huge jets of water into the burning warehouse. Then a kindly policeman pushed through the crowd and Mark gave him J.D.'s message about the ambulance.

"Better both of you come along to the police car," he said. "We'll send someone to help your father, son. He'd no right to go running off into the fire like that, and no right to let you go with him either. Might have made a lot 0' trouble. All right. All right. Steady now. Gangway, please"' and then he was nearly swept off his large feet by four children who were shouting and waving as if they were at a football match!

Linda shook her head in despair and held tight to Mark's hand. She could not possibly answer all the questions which were being hurled at her and her companion, but she did manage to smile at her new

friends. First she saw a slim, pretty girl of about sixteen, with grey eyes and with dark hair in a page-boy bob about her shoulders. She was laughing, and held out both hands to her as if she had known her all her life.

“How wonderful, Linda! You’re safe at last, and the Jillies have done it again before the grown-ups. Where’s J.D. and Guy, Mark ?”

“Coming, Mandy. We found another girl up there. She’s broken her foot or something, and must have been nearly suffocated in the smoke. They’re just behind. J.D. has to carry her.”

“Another girl ?” Mandy said. “Who is it, Linda ?”

“She’s called Joyce. She stole the scarf my Daddy gave me and she’s got a mother and father I hate and kept me a prisoner. Joyce chased me into that place just after I telephoned my Granny. She fell down the stairs and hurt herself. I couldn’t leave her there alone, could I?”

Before anyone could answer that question and it was obvious that there was no answer the younger of the two girls, whose hair hung over her shoulders in two plaits, thicker than her own had been, impetuously slipped an arm through hers and said, “Of course you couldn’t, Linda. I think you’re wonderful. Did you see me and Tim through the window of that narrow boat? We got your message, ‘Come back’.”

Then one of the small boys obviously Mandy's Brother pushed past his sister and winked at Linda, while another freckled, sandy-haired boy said fiercely, "I wants that girl wiv the scarf on 'er 'ead. I wants 'er very badly." Then he turned to Linda and said quietly, so that none of the others could hear, "I would 'ave run into that place wiv the others only they grabbed me and wouldn't let me go. I know this place, yer see. T'wasn't my fault I couldn't get in wiv the others. I done me best, see ?"

At last they reached the police car and very thankfully Linda scrambled in with as many of her new friends as it would hold.

"When will I see my Granny now ?" Linda said. "And does she know I'm all right ?"

"She does by now, my lass," the policeman at the wheel said, "and I reckon she's already on her way to the Police Station where we're going to take you just as soon as the ambulance arrives. Here's the rest of the party by the look of it, and I reckon they need my help," and he got out and forced his way through the crowd to where J.D. and Guy were carrying Joyce "bandy-chair". As they all scrambled out of the car and pushed through the crowd towards the newcomers they heard the shrill clamour of the ambulance bell, and within a very few minutes Joyce had been lifted to a stretcher. She was conscious now, and although her face was grey with pain she smiled at Linda when she

recognized her, and said something to the two men who were lifting her into the ambulance.

“She wants to speak to you, Linda,” said Mark, who was standing nearer.

Suddenly feeling rather shy with her cropped head and boy’s dirty clothes, Linda stepped forward.

“You’ll be all right now, Joyce. Honest you will. They’ll look after you. Good-bye!”

“I won’t see you again, kid, but I won’t forget you,” Joyce whispered. “Thanks for sticking to me. Take this now it’s yours!” And she took the scarf of London from her hair, pressed it into Linda’s hands, and then turned her head away as they lifted her into the ambulance and closed the doors.

The bell shrilled and the crowd parted, but Linda, standing among the new friends who had done so much for her, was looking up to where she had struggled with a trap-door, that in the end, had opened miraculously.

The fire was out now, and the gulls sailed serenely over the roof tops. A tug hooted twice from the river two hundred yards away, and it was from a great distance that she heard a policeman’s kindly voice say, “Into the car with you now, lass. There’s someone you’ll want to see waiting for you at the Police Station.”

Chapter eleven.

Happy Christmas.

Guy and Mandy were alone in the lounge of the Jillies' flat.

The room was transformed. In the corner by the window a big Christmas tree, almost hidden by parcels, tinsel and coloured lamps, touched the ceiling. The long table had been pushed back against the wall and was loaded with cakes, sandwiches, jellies, glasses, and bottles. Paper chains in spite of J.D.'s protests hung in festoons from corner to corner of the ceiling, and there was mistletoe over the doorway and dangling from the electric light. The curtains were drawn, a log fire blazed in the hearth, and the gay cushions of the window-seat were covered with coloured paper, cardboard boxes, books, and the contents of many opened parcels.

Mandy, with her hair shining in the firelight, and looking charming in a grey-blue frock and silk stockings, was sitting in her favourite position on the hearthrug with her back against the settee. Guy, also looking unusually and rather uncomfortably smart in a blue suit, got up to switch off the wireless.

Mandy yawned and stretched her arms above her head in a most unladylike manner.

"Thank goodness for a bit of peace, Guy! This is just about the grandest Christmas Day I've ever had,

but I’m not sorry to relax. How long before the others arrive ?”

“I should have thought Tim, Mark, and Sandy would have been here by now. Maybe they’ve lost their way. The arrangement was for them just to go to tea, wasn’t it? I wish Mr. and Mrs. Burton could have come to your party. I liked them.”

“So did I. When we asked them yesterday, they just said that they were more at home in Wapping, but that Sandy was going to give a party for all of us before he went back to school. That will be fun. I wonder if they’ll have it in that microscopic kitchen or in that rather dim-looking parlour. Come and sit next to me, Guy, and tell me how much you like your first Christmas in Chelsea,” and she pulled down a cushion to the floor beside her. Before he could answer this rather sweeping question, however, she went on, “I adore parties, Guy, and most particularly I like this part of a party.”

“What part ?”

“This waiting part. I like wearing my party frock, and I like the peculiar feeling in my tummy which I always get when I'm excited over something nice. I like wondering what I shall be doing in an hour’s time, and I specially like to-night because it’s Christmas and the end of an adventure and to tell you the truth, Guy, which I think may be very bad for you, I like this necklace you gave me and I like you and Mark

being here for the holiday, and I'm looking forward to hearing every bit of the story before we really start the party. Funny about Mr. Trevor, isn't it ?"

Guy sat down on the floor beside her.

"What do you mean, 'funny'? Very odd that you should think him a villian of course, Mandy. And most peculiar that you should make such a mistake."

"Don't spoil everything by being sarcastic, Guy! I can't bear it to-day and this is such fun. Anyway, I'm sure you would have been taken in by William if he'd opened the door to you and you'd seen him following Mrs. Hawkins about like a faithful retriever. As for Mr. Trevor, even if he is friendly with us now and coming to our party presently, I still think he's most peculiar and patronizing, and I don't care for it."

Guy opened his mouth to answer, but Mandy, looking dreamily into the flames and absent-mindedly playing with the necklace at her throat, went on.

"J.D. says Mr. Trevor is going to tell us everything later, but I asked specially about William. The police caught him when he was getting off a bus.

Before Guy could reply there came a shattering crash from somewhere below, and then the sound of voices raised unmelodiously in "Good King Wenceslas".

"That's Tim and the other two boys," Mandy said.

“It sounds as if they’ve had a good party already. Get up, Guy. The others will be here soon.

Tim had the sort of angelic singing voice that brought tears to the eyes of old ladies. Now he paused outside the lounge door and sang, “Sire the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger; fails my heart, I know not how, I can go no longer,” and his voice almost broke in a sob of exhaustion.

“Give him a penny, Guy, and ask him to go away,” Mandy laughed; but before they could move, the door was flung back and Tim and Mark rushed in with Sandy in the rear.

“You haven’t started this party without us have you ?” Tim demanded suspiciously, and then smiled happily when he saw the loaded table.

“No they haven’t,” Mark said. “Unless they’re having one on their own. They look as if they are. Where’s Prue ?”

“Prue has gone round to Mrs. Hawkins’ to help Linda into her party frock. J.D.’s there too. He’s having what he calls a ‘Pre-Party’ with Mr. Trevor and Mr. Ferguson, who is Linda’s father, but they’ll all be here soon. Tim! You’re forgetting your manners and so am I. Is that Sandy hiding behind you? Come in, Sandy, and let’s look at you properly. Happy Christmas, Sandy, and thank you very much for coming to our party. Did you tell your mother that

you’re staying the night here ?”

Sandy, who seemed suddenly stricken with shyness, gulped and nodded. Truth to tell, he looked so different from the grubby, lively little boy they had got to know and like so much a few days ago, that Mandy found it difficult to be natural with him. There was no doubt that he was specially dressed for a special occasion a thick tweed jacket and long trousers in a loud design with a dark red stripe; shining black boots, a khaki collar, and yellow-spotted tie. His face was shining, too, but his hair had been watered and plastered flat to his head. At this moment he looked acutely uncomfortable, but did manage a grin when Tim said, “If you people can put on a party just half as good as the one we’ve had this afternoon, I’ll be surprised. I’ll bet nobody will play a concertina to-night, but Mr. Burton did. And I’ll tell you another thing: Sandy can play the mouth-organ, and he’s got one in his pocket for later on. Didn’t we have the grandest party, Mark ?”

“We certainly did. I'm having the best Christmas I can remember. I don’t think I’ll be able to eat a thing after what Mrs. Burton gave us.”

“We made one-and-nine pence this afternoon,” Tim said triumphantly as he paused at the door. “Next year we’re really going to organize it and do better, but we made this in ten minutes.”

“How ?” asked Mandy as she got up and stealthily

reached for a cushion. “How did you make one-and-nine-pence, brat ?”’

“Singing ‘Wenceslas’ to a bus queue in Aldgate where we had to change buses,” Tim shouted as the cushion thudded against the slammed door.

A few minutes later the rest of the party arrived. The girls dashed ahead of the others and were in the room while the grown-ups were still in the hall.

“Why, Linda!” Mandy said. “I wouldn’t have known you. And your hair is wonderful.”

Linda stood for a moment in the centre of the room, not knowing what to say to these wonderful new friends. Gone for ever was the grubby, woebegone little boy with the cropped head and dirty dungarees. Her eyes and cheeks were bright with excitement, and her fair hair, now waved and set cunningly to her head, shone as it had never done before.

“Do you really like it, Mandy? Really? Granny sent me to her own hairdresser yesterday to have it done like this specially for your party. It’s an extra Christmas present she said. Daddy’s just coming up with Granny, and I'm longing for you to meet him. Oh! Hullo, all you boys. What a lot of you there seem to be. Mandy, I think you look absolutely wonderful!”

Then the others came in, and Mrs. Hawkins looking really magnificent and with lots of sparkling rings,

was put in the chair of honour near the fire and introduced to the Standings and Sandy.

Mr. Ferguson was very nice and, to Mandy's astonishment, kissed her under the mistletoe and then shook hands with the boys.

"Maybe I don't know everything yet that you've all done to help my Linda, but I do know that neither her Granny nor her father can ever thank you all enough." Mr. Trevor seemed to be doing his best to look genial but was not very successful. For one awful moment Mandy thought he was going to forget himself when he greeted her, but after looking at her carefully through his beribboned glasses, he shook hands with her and wished her the "Compliments of the Season.

J.D., of course, was just J.D., and catching Linda unawares, he lifted her up and kissed her and then told her that always for-ever-after she was welcome to his home.

"And just remember, my dear," he laughed as he set her down again, "that whatever you may think of these children of mine, the organizing brain behind your rescue was mine."

This statement was greeted with cries of derision from his children, but it was Prue who noticed the expression of astonishment on Mrs. Hawkins' face.

"Stop!" Prue shouted. "The Jillies are not behaving

themselves. Please forgive us if we seem rather noisy, Mrs. Hawkins. It's just that you don't know us very well yet."

Then Mandy crossed the room to Mr. Trevor who was now standing by himself by the Christmas-tree and looking more supercilious than ever.

"Please, Mr. Trevor," she said, "please put up with us just for this evening, and please forgive us for interfering with your plans for rescuing Linda. You didn't know us, you see, and I s'pose you thought we were interfering and we thought you didn't like us."

Mr. Trevor tried a smile, which was rather more like a grimace.

"I don't blame you a bit if you didn't!" Mandy laughed. "But please do forget it now, Mr. Trevor. Please do enjoy our party with us now."

Guy spoke up then to save Mr. Trevor embarrassment.

"Just before we start, and if nobody else minds, we'd all like to hear Mr. Trevor tell us the story of everything that has happened. We know now what happened to Linda, but it was Mr. Trevor who worked with the police and I'm sure nobody knows more about it all than he does. Would you mind, sir ?"

This was very clever of Guy because there was nothing Mr. Trevor liked better than talking. He

didn't really dislike the Jillies and their friends but was just one of those unfortunate people who can never understand boys and girls, nor realize how nearly grown-up most of them are!

At Guy's suggestion everyone made polite noises of agreement and Sandy, rather unfortunately, clapped. Tim hurriedly passed him a mince-pie from the table as Mr. Trevor polished his glasses and proceeded pompously to the hearthrug.

The Law was Mr. Trevor's profession, and he now addressed the Jillies' party rather as if they were a jury. But he told the story well enough and without too many interruptions. Mandy slipped down into her favourite position on the hearthrug against Mrs. Hawkins' chair, and Guy doubled up his long legs and sat beside her. Linda and Mark fidgeted a little on each side of Mr. Ferguson, while J.D. leaned against the table and guarded it from the wandering fingers and apparently insatiable appetites of Tim and Sandy.

When all was settled, Mr. Trevor cleared his throat, twiddled his glasses on their black ribbon, and began by admitting that the police had told him that William, who was responsible for the whole scheme, had tried exactly the same trick successfully once before. He had been with Mrs. Hawkins nearly a year and had seemed to be a most devoted servant. She had indeed treated him as a friend, so that it had not taken him long to discover that Linda meant everything to her since her own daughter had died, and that she was

likely to pay very heavily to keep the child unhurt and safe.

At this point in the story Mr. Ferguson interrupted.

“Forgive me, Trevor, but it will be easier for us all if T just say now that I have been very wrong in maintaining a ridiculous and out-of-date quarrel with Mrs. Hawkins. The fault was largely mine, and I am pleased to say that we have agreed to forget the past and start afresh. I have no doubt that we shall both be helped by Linda.”

Sandy got ready his clap again, and was just checked in time by J.D., and then Mr. Trevor “hurrumphed” loudly and went on to tell them that Mrs. Hawkins had admitted that it was William who had first suggested that Linda should spend Christmas in Chelsea without her father, and had pressed his point with subtlety until he got his way.

“I’m afraid all you nice people will think it extremely foolish of me to have taken so much notice of William,” Mrs. Hawkins broke in here, “but he was kind to me and I was lonely. I still think he was mostly influenced by his wife, who, you will all have realized, was the woman in black who met Linda with such an ingenious story on the train.”

Mr. Trevor’s gloomy expression showed that he did not like being interrupted; so, as quickly as he could with dignity, he went on to explain that even if it had not been foggy on that particular day “Mrs. William”

would have boarded the train somewhere, found Linda, and persuaded her to leave the train at Watford.

“Forgive me, sir,” Guy asked, “but how do we know this? Did she confess, and where was she caught ?”

“We know, my boy, because the couple on the London Pride have now admitted it. William’s wife has not opened her mouth since she was caught by the police at the corner of the street here. The police have had a plain-clothes detective about here for some days, and when they caught William a radio car picked up the fact that his wife was wanted urgently and passed on the message to the patrol. When William failed to return, she must have lost her nerve and tried to run away. She was carrying a suit-case when they caught her.”

Mark opened his mouth to ask a question but was checked by Mr. Trevor’s upraised hand.

“You are going to ask me about the bargee and his wife,” he said. “I think that I mentioned that the man when captured I will relate how, in one moment, if I am not interrupted made a complete confession of his share in the crime. It seems that William had once before hidden a child on one of the narrow-boats using the Grand Union Canal, and was determined to try the trick again. The bargee and his wife were poor, in debt, and easy enough to bribe by William and his wife, who are certainly both very clever rogues. I was going to relate that the man and his wife were caught

by the police in an upper room of the deserted inn to which Linda had been taken before being rowed over to the moored barges. They were a lazy, incompetent couple, for they were sleeping when the police walked in. If one of them had been on the watch they would have seen Amanda and Guy rowing across, but I believe they had a violent quarrel with William when he arrived, and that the man refused to row him across to see Linda, who they did not know had escaped. They were poor and incompetent criminals."

"I see," Mandy said thoughtfully. "Just as soon as William got aboard to find that Linda had escaped, he would have seen all of us at Drake's Stairs and then seen Guy and me rowing across to him. It was a bit tricky for him, wasn't it ?"

Then J.D. took up the tale.

"It was some time after my undisciplined family and their friends strolled out of Limehouse Police Station, because they were bored, that the police decided that they would like to ask them some questions, and, not for the first time, I was made to feel a little foolish. I decided that the least I could do was to tramp the streets of Wapping in search of the truants. I was surprised that the police let me get out of their hands, but they decided to risk it. I admit now that I was hopelessly lost when I met the party of juniors who had gallantly come out to find me. They had, in the mean-time, taken the trophy of the second plait to the police and told them of the deserted dinghy. While we were

discussing the situation as rationally as possible in Rosemary Lane, we heard the fire-engines, and got mixed up with the mob running to the fire. The rest you all know.”

“Please, I'd like to know how you found the other trap-door and rescued me,” Linda said.

“Prudence here maintained that she saw you at a window on the top floor. I wasn’t sure, but as there didn’t seem any time to waste if there was anyone there we thought we’d have a glance round inside.”

“But the firemen?” Mrs. Hawkins interrupted, “Surely they. ?”

“They didn’t believe me,” Prue said. “They said the warehouse had been empty for years and they were annoyed about J.D. and Guy and Mark dashing in there. We had a job to keep Sandy back too. Go on, though, J.D. Tell us the rest.”

“Not much more to tell,” her father said. “We soon found we couldn’t reach the top floors by the stairs, and Guy suggested that we try to find another way to the roof and then see if we could see down to the ledge where Prue thought she’d seen this child. We found the other part of the warehouse, climbed to the top, and heard a banging on a trap-door in the ceiling. That’s all.”

“It’s not all,” Mr. Ferguson said, as he slipped an

arm round his daughter's shoulders. "But it's all you'll tell. Is that other girl all right ?"

Mr. Trevor took up the tale again.

"I am told she is progressing favourably in hospital. The police will not be very interested in her now that she has confirmed the story told by her mother and father. Is there anything else ?"

"Yes sir," said Guy, "there is something else. I saw as much of that fire as I wanted during the short time I was there, but I think everyone here ought to know that young Linda could easily have left Joyce to look after herself. She didn't do that. Even when we found her on the roof she was thinking only of Joyce, who told the ambulance man and I got the news back somehow that she would have been suffocated but for Linda. She seemed grateful."

"And that's unusual enough in these days," J.D. put in.

Mandy went over to Linda to help her over her shyness.

"It was clever of you to drop the plaits, Linda. A bit like a paper-chase with only two clues."

"I dropped the first on purpose," Linda admitted, "but I didn't realize that the other must have slipped

- out of my pocket when I was struggling to make that

beastly little boat go straight. Anyway, it's all over now and I've never felt so happy, so need we talk about it any more, please? You see, never as long as I live can I say "Thank you' enough to all of you, my new friends, who did not even know me."

Then she turned her face to her father's sleeve to hide the tears, while Sandy started to clap again and the others cheered.

"A toast!" Prue shouted suddenly. "I've thought of a toast. Let's drink it to start our party. Quick, Mandy and Tim. Glasses and drinks for everybody!"

And then, when the Jillies had seen that every glass was filled, Prue jumped on to a chair and raised her own glass high.

"To two fair plaits," she called, "and may they grow again soon!"